New Criticism

Preparing to read and write using the lens of New Criticism:
New Criticism makes arguments about how a text creates and communicates its meaning. Thus in New Criticism, the critic’s (your) argument must identify both the meaning of the text and the major literary device (the style) the text uses to create or communicate that unified meaning. The more specific your argument is in identifying both the meaning and the style of the text, the more successful the argument will be. For example, it is not enough to say simply that a text uses or has symbolism; instead, you must identify and discuss a particular symbol or a particular type of symbolism or a particular purpose of the symbolism the text uses as well as the meaning that symbolism reveals.

In addition, New Criticism focuses entirely on your close reading, explication, interpretation, and analysis of the text: what you notice, how and why it stands out, and your understanding of the significance each observation has for the meaning and purpose of the text. While you never use “I” or refer to reading or writing about the text, of course, it is your mind at work, your powers of observation, analysis, interpretation, and synthesis that you are presenting, proving, and developing.

So a good way to get started is to ask yourself questions: What literary devices (listed on the following pages or others) do I notice in this text? What stands out, where, and why? How does each element I notice contribute to the meaning of the text? Note: While the most extreme (and now outdated) version of New Criticism might argue for a single “universal” (agreed-upon) meaning, for our purposes, we will start with the premise that there is not just one possible meaning for any given text, but many possibilities. You are, however, limited to and responsible for just one. That one meaning, how it is communicated, and why it is communicated in that way is your argument.

What to avoid when reading and writing using the lens of New Criticism:
New Criticism focuses entirely on the text; anything outside the text is considered irrelevant:
1. Thus New Critics do not concern themselves with the effect of the text on the reader or the reader’s emotions (affect). This concern is referred to as the Affective fallacy.
2. Biographical and historical/cultural information about the author or the time in which the author wrote is either de-emphasized or excluded when New Critics analyze the text. Outside information may be referred to if it is vital to understand the subject of a text, but the meaning and purpose of the text must be proved with analysis and close reading (explication) of the text and how it communicates that meaning/purpose.
3. Similarly, New Critics do not concern themselves with the author’s intentions—what he or she intended to say—as this intention is considered outside the text. Thus this approach is referred to as the Intentional fallacy.
4. Paraphrase in New Criticism is perhaps the greatest heresy as the purpose of New Criticism is to interpret the meaning of the text by analyzing how the text communicates that meaning, something which paraphrase, because of its focus on content alone, cannot do. Also, New Critics believe any change to the text, including summary or paraphrase, which changes its words, changes its meaning. Thus failing to quote in a paper using the approach of New Criticism demonstrates a lack of understanding of this literary theory.
Final note:
Every literary analysis essay you write employs New Criticism to some degree, at the very least focusing on the text sufficiently to identify its argument (meaning and/or purpose) and to prove that argument with evidence from the text and your interpretation of it.

Read over the following pages to gain a better understanding of New Criticism and how to apply it to your literary analysis:

Key Terms/Concepts:

Most terms are defined in the “Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms” at the end of Reading and Writing about Literature by Janet E. Gardner and/or in the body of the book itself (see the index at the end of the book). Those that *aren’t defined are defined below, and some that +are defined are given more explanation.

1. Diction: abstract and concrete language, denotation, connotation
   a. *etymology: the history of a word. Detailed information on the history of words can be found in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) which can be useful in determining a word’s specific meaning or meanings at the time it was used.
2. Allusion
3. Literal language
4. Figurative language
5. +Imagery/image conveys sensory experience in essence by creating that sensation or object in the reader’s imagination (often sight but also sound, smell, taste, touch, motion. Images can be literal or figurative. See below.)
7. A figurative image suggests the essence of a thing by comparing it to the sight, sound, etc., of something else. Figures of speech, such as metaphors and similes, are generally images though not always.
8. Figure of speech: metaphor, simile, metonymy, synecdoche, personification, symbol, synesthesia, allusion, hyperbole, understatement, paradox, oxymoron.
9. *Mimesis means imitation (mimicry) or representation (see Imitation in the glossary), in this case, literature imitating or representing life. Texts reflect or represent—in their form, structure, imagery, etc.—the real, natural, and/or human experience they depict, enabling or compelling readers to share that experience. Often, the reader’s experience of the text or response to it is made to mimic the characters’.
10. Sound: alliteration, cacophony, euphony, consonance, assonance, onomatopoeia
11. *Motifs are the repeated or recurrent patterns—words, phrases, images, objects, sounds, scenes, structures, concepts, themes, etc.,—that unify the text and work together to communicate its meaning, effect, and/or purpose.
12. +Ambiguity in literature is found in words, statements, or situations, etc., that have more than one possible meaning. These possibilities make the text more complex and interesting and more meaningful, and are analyzed to reveal their effect and purpose.
13. Irony: dramatic, situational, verbal
14. +Unity is the oneness or coherence of a text—short story, poem, novel, play—seen in the way its parts or elements work together to create a sense of it as an organic whole.
15. +Tension occurs between seemingly contradictory elements of the text—irony, ambiguity, paradox—contradictions, which the reader/critic must resolve or reconcile in order to make meaning and to make of the text a unified whole. These elements that resist unity do not detract from a text but rather signal its greater complexity, interest, and significance.
16. Point of View
17. Narrator
18. Character
19. Protagonist
20. Antagonist
21. Voice
22. Speaker
23. Tone
24. Structure/Form
25. *Pace/Pacing is the speed at which a text moves due to its form and content, often
determined by the length, and its variety or monotony, of a line or sentence, stanza or
paragraph, and section, chapter, or scene, and in prose the use of description or exposition
versus dialogue, and in drama the length of characters’ lines in a scene, etc., including
silences and actions, etc. Syntax (sentence structure) and sentence types as well as
rhythm/sound and diction also have an impact on pacing.
26. Plot: climax, denouement. Short stories according to Alice Adams, typically follow
ABDCE structure: action, background, development (movement of the plot forward,
physically or psychologically), climax (or turning points), ending. Not all stories follow
this order though most have all of these elements. Similarly, while plot in drama
traditionally includes prologue or exposition, rising action, complication, climax, falling
action, and catastrophe or denouement, not all plays follow this order or include all steps
discretely, and modern plays may conform more to the ABDCE structure, again with
some steps rearranged or merged.
27. Misfortunes
28. Flashback
29. Foreshadowing
30. Juxtaposition
31. Description
32. Exposition
33. Dialogue
34. Setting
35. *Defamiliarization is the way in New Criticism a text makes the familiar seem strange
and thereby makes the reader aware of and open to new understanding of his or her
reality as if he or she is seeing it for the first time.
Man’s Humanity to Man

Robert Burns claimed in 1784 in his poem “Man Was Made to Mourn: A Dirge” that “Man’s inhumanity to man / Makes countless thousands mourn” (lines 55-6), ironically characterizing cruelty as an inhuman and primitive trait despite the human tendency to be cruel, which his poem so clearly acknowledged and illustrated. Shirley Jackson, author of the short story “The Lottery,” would disagree with the assumption that cruelty is inhuman. She had no such illusions or expectations of humanity’s essential benevolence. One need do no more than read her story using the lens of New Criticism to notice her implicit cynicism. Indeed, her story “The Lottery” paints a picture of humanity as inherently, naturally cruel and condemns humanity as ultimately irredeemably savage.

Without a doubt, the ending of the story paints a clear picture of human brutality. The act of stoning is itself violent, a killing that is enacted up close in which the killer sees and is seen by the victim. In addition, the horror and brutality are heightened by the fact that the ritual requires the participation of the entire village, including children and even the family members of the victim, not just in the selection process but in the killing as well. No one, except the victim, is exempt from this violence, or blameless for it, as the story illustrates early on by having “[t]he children assemble[] first [as a matter] of course” (963), echoed at the end when “someone gave little Davy Hutchinson a few pebbles” (969). The diminutive phrase “little Davy Hutchinson” is
transformed with the addition of "a few pebbles" so that in this context it no longer evokes innocence but culpability, showing us how the community teaches their traditions to the next generation, thus perpetuating those traditions and making sure everyone is equally guilty. The final image of the story is of the village as a mob, descending on Tessie Hutchinson. Notably absent is any sort of metaphor; the villagers are not compared to beasts or monsters. Instead, they are described simply, straight-forwardly as collectively "remember[ing] to use stones" though other parts of the ritual have been forgotten, urging each other on, making choices that reflect individual abilities and tendencies, such as the number and size of stones to use (639), behaviors that are all inescapably human. The savagery, too, then must be recognized and condemned as human.

The cynicism reflected in the story's unapologetic portrait of humanity as irrevocably savage is deeply disturbing, and it's understandable why audiences then and now have been both transfixed and outraged by Shirley Jackson's story. The horror it confronts us with may be a fiction, but that doesn't negate its truth, especially the potential to recognize ourselves in the villagers. Haven't we individually and collectively faced situations when we have been silent in the face of injustice, when we have clung to traditions that allowed the perpetuation of injustice, when we have chosen to protect ourselves and preserve our wellbeing by sacrificing other people and their wellbeing, sometimes without question or hesitation? When it comes down to it, their humanity is ours. If Tessie Hutchinson's final outcry is an ironic protest against the human tendency to allow and perpetuate brutality, meant for us to hear as Jackson's appeal to us, there seems to be little expectation that we will, in fact, hear it.
Deconstruction

Preparing to read and write using the lens of Deconstruction:
Deconstruction is an extension of and a response to New Criticism. Like New Criticism, its focus is on the close reading/explication and analysis of the text itself and its meaning, excluding external (extraneous) factors, such as the author’s intent, contextual information, or the reader’s response. Unlike New Criticism, however, it argues against the unity or certainty of meaning of a text, instead looking at how the text works against itself, calling its own meaning into question, offering instead multiple provisional meanings.

One way to get started is to do what Derrida called a “double reading,” to go through the text and do a traditional New Critical reading of the text, identifying one possible meaning the Deconstruction will subsequently call into question and the literary devices that are responsible for communicating that meaning. The same key terms/concepts used in New Criticism are also used in Deconstruction (and so are listed on the following pages as well along with some questions to consider when reading/writing about a text using a Deconstructionist lens). In addition, Deconstruction looks specifically for binary oppositions, closely related terms, like male/female, day/night, light/dark, good/evil, nature/civilization, etc., in which one term (the first one named) seems to be “privileged” over or more highly valued than the other. However, rather than merely trying to prove the text values or privileges the one, the deconstructionist critic seeks to show how this value is not sustained but shown and then reversed, calling the value or hierarchy and even the opposition into question, thereby arguing that the seemingly contradictory values/terms are instead interconnected or interdependent (in a “both . . . and” rather than an “either . . . or” relationship). Note: Contrasts are not the same as contradictions. A text (story or play) may present two or more contrasting views, but if they belong to different perspectives/characters, and the text seems to side with only one, it is not a contradiction but instead simply a contrast.

In addition, Deconstruction argues that language is inherently ambiguous and thus is responsible for calling the meaning of a text into question. For example, though most readers typically accept the phrase “Time flies like an arrow” (an extension of the cliché “time flies”) to mean time moves at a fast pace, a deconstructionist critic would point out that it, in fact, can be shown to have multiple meanings when “questioned” and examined closely. Some of them are (taken from the *OWL Purdue* website):

- Time (noun) flies (verb) like an arrow (adverb clause) = Time passes quickly.
- Time (verb) flies (object) like an arrow (adverb clause) = Get out your stopwatch and time the speed of flies as you would time an arrow’s flight.
- Time flies (noun) like (verb) an arrow (object) = Time flies are fond of arrows (or at least of one particular arrow).

In our close reading of texts, we will look for where these linguistic ambiguities appear naturally rather than trying to impose them. For example in the line “O, my love is like a red, red rose” from Robert Burns’ poem “A Red, Red Rose,” we might ask whether the word “love” refers to the speaker’s loved one or his own feeling of love or both. As we continue reading the line, we might notice the binary oppositions between the fragile/soft (feminine) rose and the implied resilient/sharp (masculine) thorn the rose brings to mind. In each opposition, which characteristic is he saying is true of his love? Which does the poem seem to value/privilege: fragility/softness/feminine love or resilience/sharpness/masculine love? Or are the opposing characteristics/values interconnected? Does love depend on both? Obviously, the poem continues beyond this first line as would our deconstruction of it, but this discovery gives us a pattern or motif to build on.
Final note:
Applying Deconstruction in a literary analysis essay may seem inherently contradictory given Deconstruction’s insistence on the lack of unity or certainty of meaning of a text and the literary analysis essay’s equally emphatic insistence on a coherent argument of its own as well as one identified in the text or texts it’s analyzing. The claim of a deconstructive essay will argue the (unified) significance or purpose of the binary opposition, ambiguity, inherent contradiction, or uncertainty of meaning it identifies in a text while the body of the essay will explore and analyze the particular oppositions or contradictions, etc., as well as prove their significance or purpose (your claim).

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1. *Binary means having two alternatives. According to Deconstruction, language is based on oppositions; words only have meaning in opposition to other words. Thus “hot” only has meaning because we can contrast it with “cold”; “man” takes on meaning in opposition to “woman” or “boy” or “nature,” etc. Deconstruction further argues that one alternative is always suppressed, falsely simplifying reality.
2. *Binary oppositions are paired opposites in which the term that is named first is the dominant (valued/privileged) concept, making the dichotomy an evaluative hierarchy. However, this hierarchy is always unstable as the terms (and their relative value) can be inverted.
3. Diction: abstract and concrete language, denotation, connotation
   a. *etymology: the history of a word. Detailed information on the history of words can be found in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) which can be useful in determining a word’s specific meaning or meanings at the time it was used.
4. Allusion
5. Literal language
6. Figurative language
7. +Imagery/image conveys sensory experience in essence by creating that sensation or object in the reader’s imagination (often sight but also sound, smell, taste, touch, motion. Images can be literal or figurative. See below.)
8. *A literal image depicts what it names: a chair, grass, a weeping willow.
9. *A figurative image suggests the essence of a thing by comparing it to the sight, sound, etc., of something else. Figures of speech, such as metaphors and similes, are generally images though not always.
10. Figure of speech: metaphor, simile, metonymy, synecdoche, personification, symbol, synesthesia, allegory, hyperbole, understatement, paradox, oxymoron.
11. *Mimesis means imitation (mimicry) or representation (see Imitation in the glossary), in this case, literature imitating or representing life. Texts reflect or represent—in their form, structure, imagery, etc.—the real, natural, and/or human experience they depict, enabling or compelling readers to share that experience. Often, the reader’s experience of the text or response to it is made to mimic the characters’.
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17. Point of View

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25. Structure/Form

26. *Pace/Pacing is the speed at which a text moves due to its form and content, often determined by the length, and its variety or monotony, of a line or sentence, stanza or paragraph, and section, chapter, or scene, and in prose the use of description or exposition versus dialogue, and in drama the length of characters’ lines in a scene, etc., including silences and actions, etc. Syntax (sentence structure) and sentence types as well as rhythm/sound and diction also have an impact on pacing.

27. *Plot: climax, denouement. Short stories according to Alice Adams, typically follow ABDCE structure: action, background, development (movement of the plot forward, physically or psychologically), climax (or turning points), ending. Not all stories follow this order though most have all of these elements. Similarly, while plot in drama traditionally includes prologue or exposition, rising action, complication, climax, falling action, and catastrophe or denouement, not all plays follow this order or include all steps discreetly, and modern plays may conform more to the ABDCE structure, again with some steps rearranged or merged.

28. Conflict

29. Flashback

30. Foreshadowing

31. Juxtaposition

32. Description

33. Exposition

34. Dialogue

35. Setting
MAKING A DECONSTRUCTIVE ANALYSIS

To understand the discussion that follows, you will need to read "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," a poem by Robert Frost, found on page 285.

Whereas a traditional critical reading attempts to establish a meaning for a text, a deconstructive reading involves asking questions in an effort to show that what the text claims to be saying is different from what the text is really saying (which, of course, is acknowledged to be provisional). It tries to undermine the work’s implied claim of having coherence, unity, and meaning and to show that it does not represent the truth of its subject. In fact, no final statement about its meaning can be made, for each reading is provisional, just one in a series of interpretations that decenter each other in ongoing play. In the absence of a transcendental signified, a text cannot be said to be tied to some center that existed before and outside it, and meaning can have no place to conclude, nothing in which to be conflated.

A number of people have tried to summarize the process of deconstructing a text. Derrida himself explained it by saying that "the reading must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of the language that he uses." As Sharon Crowley describes the process in Teacher's Introduction to Deconstruction, it tries to "tease larger systemic motifs out of gaps, aberrations, or inconsistencies in a given text." It tries to find blind spots that a writer has absorbed from cultural systems. She adds that "deconstruction amounts to reading texts in order to rewrite them," just as Derrida tried "to reread Western history to give voice to that which has been systematically silenced." (Paul de Man has perhaps had the
must express those discoveries in logocentric language, the interpretation will deconstruct itself as well.

How do you find alternative meanings, especially if you are accustomed to assuming that there is an inherent meaning to be found, that it will be recognizable to other readers, and that the picture it gives of the world will be consonant with the way the world really is? How do you find contradictory or incompatible meanings if you are used to finding the meaning of a text or passage?

You can begin by locating the binary oppositions in the text, identifying the member that is privileged and the one that is not. All key terms and characters are defined by their oppositions, and the deconstructive reader will show how the pairs are mutually dependent but also unstable. In "Stopping by Woods," for example, a number of hierarchical oppositions are quickly noted: silence/sound, nature/civilization, isolation/community, dark/light, stillness/activity, unconscious/conscious, and, by implication, death/life and dreams/reality. A careful look at them will give you a way of entering the poem deconstructively. For example, try to answer the following questions about the hierarchical oppositions, and then compare your answers with the commentary that follows each.

- What values and ideas do the hierarchies reflect? Your answer will define some of the preconceptions that influence the way the text is conventionally read.
  
  If you accept the first of each paired term to be the privileged one, you will read the poem as a statement about the value of experiencing peace, oneness with nature, acceptance of self. There is beauty in the moment and a sense of connection with primordial forces.

- What do you find when you reverse the binary oppositions? What fresh perspectives on the poem emerge? Because the hierarchy is arbitrary and illusory, it can be turned upside down to provide a new view of the values and beliefs that underlie it. The new, unconventional relationships may radically change your perception of the terms or of the text.

The interesting aspect of the oppositions in this poem is that the "privileged" terms throughout most of it are reversed at the end when the traveler chooses to continue his journey. For the first three stanzas, silence is favored over sound, nature over civilization, isolation over community, and so on. When, however, the persona rejects the loneliness of the dark, deep woods and chooses to honor promises that he is otherwise bound to keep, he acknowledges that he lives in a world that expects him to renounce self-indulgent dreams and carry out his obligations. He is part of a society that honors community, activity, consciousness, and reality.

Although in this case the poet himself has provided a reversal, the reader still must ask what has been changed by it. What else is affected? What would be different, for example, if the traveler opted for nature, darkness, and dreams? What if the forces that attracted him so powerfully throughout most of the experience remained the privileged ones? What would different if isolation were deemed to be more attractive than community? What if it were preferable to be alone, outside the company of friends and family? Then the woods would belong to nobody, or at least the narrator would not acknowledge their claim, and there would be no self-consciousness about being observed.

most to say about "blind spots." In Blindness and Insight, he goes so far as to assert that critics achieve insight through their "peculiar blindness." He finds that they say something besides what they mean.

Barbara Johnson's frequently quoted definition of deconstruction says that it occurs by "the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text itself." Jonathan Culler says that "to deconstruct a discourse is to show how it undermines the philosophy it asserts, or the hierarchical oppositions on which it relies." A more detailed comment comes from J. Hillis Miller:

Deconstruction as a mode of interpretation works by a careful and circumspect entering of each textual labyrinth.... The deconstructive critic seeks to find, by this process of retracing, the element in the system studied which is alogical, the thread in the text in question which will unravel it all, or the loose stone which will pull down the whole building. The deconstruction, rather, annihilates the ground on which the building stands by showing that the text has already annihilated the ground, knowingly or unknowingly. Deconstruction is not a dismantling of the structure of a text but a demonstration that it has already dismantled itself.

Such definitions are helpful, but how does the deconstructive critic go about "unraveling" the text or finding a writer's blind spots or a text's "gaps, aberrations, or inconsistencies"? The process is actually somewhat similar to the one used in formalism. That is, the reader engages in a very close reading of the text, noting the presence and operation of all its elements. However, the ends of the two approaches are radically different. Whereas formalism seeks to demonstrate that a work has essential unity despite the paradoxes and irony that create its inner tension, that it expresses a realizable truth, deconstruction seeks to show that a text has no organic unity or basis for presenting meanings, only a series of conflicting significations.

One way to begin is to follow Derrida's own process, which he called "double reading." That is, you first go through a text in a traditional manner, pointing out where it seems to have determinate meanings. The first step in deconstructing Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," for example, might be to make a commentary on the narrator's desire for peace, the highly controlled form, or the cumulative effect of the images of night, winter, and sleep. On second reading, however, you would question what is accepted in the poem as natural or self-evident, looking to find places where the attitudes or assumptions identified on first reading are contradicted or undermined. When incompatible meanings are brought to light, the text deconstructs itself. These incompatible meanings undermine the grounds on which the text is based, and meaning becomes indeterminate. The text is not unitary and unified in the manner that logocentrism promises. Recognizing that a text has multiple interpretations, the reader expects to interpret it over and over again. No single reading is irrevocable; it can always be displaced by a subsequent one. Thus interpretation becomes a creative act as important as the text undergoing interpretation. The pleasure lies in the discovery of new ways of seeing the work. Of course, because the reader
Conformity to social norms and pressures (signaled by the horse) would cease to exist. The world would be marked by an absence of stress and the presence of peace. The narrator would be liberated from drudgery, labor, the burdens of responsibility, which are implied by the penultimate line. Structure and segmentation would disappear, and in their place would be spontaneity and natural reactions. And perhaps most important, one would feel a sense of unity with nature. To be alone is for the moment appealing, and this overturned hierarchy offers a new and provisional center of meaning.

Do you find any contradictions in the privileged members? Or are they incompatible?

The privileged terms silence, isolation, stillness, and unconscious initially seem to fit easily into a single scene, but on closer analysis, some inconsistencies emerge. There are contradictions in the poem that go unacknowledged. For example, the traveler enjoys the pleasures of isolation but ultimately opts for community. He savors the beauty of nature but chooses civilization. When he continues his journey, isolation and nature are decentered by community and civilization. In the end, contradictory hierarchies (isolation/community and community/isolation, nature/civilization and civilization/nature) are privileged by the protagonist even though they are incompatible. The opposed conditions cannot exist together, though that is never overtly acknowledged in the poem. Their incongruity underscores the fragmented, conflicted nature of the traveler himself. It also asserts the lack of fixed, unchanging meaning in poems or in life itself.

What else do the terms make you think of? What other hierarchies do they lead to? Such associations will suggest alternative readings, new terms that can descenter the ones currently controlling the interpretation.

Earlier it was noted that stillness, silence, isolation, and the rest seem, by extension, to suggest the unconscious and death. By establishing unconscious/conscious and death/life as major oppositions, the old reading about promises and duties is decentered and replaced with an interpretation having to do with renunciation of vitality and presence, a quite different set of concerns. In this way, the chain of significans rolls over and over, moving from one provisional meaning to another.

How do the binary terms supplement each other? How does each help the reader understand its opposing term? How do they reinforce both presence and absence?

At the end of Frost’s poem, when the narrator exchanges the peace of aloneness (isolation) for reengagement with the world, nature and civilization and countryside and village are not opposites; rather they are experiences in the being of the narrator that decenter and supplement each other. He is attracted by the solace of the wilderness scene in the woods, but he chooses the world of obligations and work. He is not, of course, a unified being but a fragmented one who speaks from the unconscious and returns at the end to the conscious world. He exists in dream and reality.

Another deconstructive approach is to take what has heretofore seemed marginal and make it central. Elements customarily considered to be of minor interest can become the focus of interest, with binary oppositions and possible reversals of their own. The comment that ordinarily receives little attention is brought to the center to see what new understandings surface, or a minor character may be scrutinized as critical to what happens in the plot. For example, in “Stopping by Woods,” a close look at the horse is revealing. Seemingly of slight importance to what happens in the poem or what it may mean, the horse turns out to be surprisingly significant. Described in the poem as “little” (“My little horse must think it queer/To stop without a farmhouse near”), he turns out to play a large role. He “gives his harness bells a shake,” thereby reminding the narrator of responsibility, duty, and social judgments. He interrupts the silence with sound, supplanting the peacefulness of the moment with a call to activity and conformity, replacing absence with presence. The horse becomes, in a sense, the voice of the conscious and civilized world, which in itself is a commentary on that world. Nevertheless, the traveler exchanges his dreams for reality. The horse’s bells, sounds that are not even language, displace isolation as a center of meaning and thereby change the direction of the poem. The animal’s impact would easily go unnoticed, except that the deconstructionist moves him to center stage.

Any “hidden” contradictions and discrepancies between what the text seems to say and what it actually says are important. Such incongruities are often found in what is not said, in gaps of information, silences, tensions, questions, or sometimes figures of speech. The author’s intent is of no help in this process because what the author thinks was said may not be the case at all. In fact, by identifying those places where a slip of language occurs—that is, where something is said that was not meant to be said—you have found a point at which a text begins to deconstruct itself. By discovering a pattern of such inconsistencies and trying to account for it, a different interpretation becomes possible. The reader of this poem wonders, for instance, about the distance between the terms used to describe the woods. They are said to be “lovely, dark, and deep.” The first descriptive word connotes aesthetic pleasure, the next two a sense of threat or mystery. The solace that the narrator imputes to the woods is threatened. It is, finally, not there, or at least it is there only momentarily. The woods have no permanent, stable, consistent self.

Looking at a binary opposition, such as presence/absence, for example, reversed by Derrida so that absence is favored, often helps a reader deconstruct a text. In “Stopping by Woods,” it is significant that the narrator’s words come unspoken from the inner self. They appear to exist only in thought. Phono-centric views would give them a privileged position because they are closest to the man. They represent him, stand in for him, displace him. The inner words ultimately appear in writing, however, displacing speech (which in this case is unvoiced), which displaced unspoken thought, which initially displaced the man. The presence of being is far removed. The words of the persona supplement (act as additions to and substitutions for) him. Further, the bells of the horse metaphorically make the horse a spokesperson for the community, thereby displacing the horse’s center. Sound has replaced speech. Animal has replaced people. Absence is thereby privileged over presence.

In sum, the narrator of “Stopping by Woods” is seen to be a logocentric being who looks for a center where there is none. Finding only momentary meaning, he moves on to seek a center in work and community. He yearns for
peace but displaces it with obligations because although unity is desirable, it is absent, only fleetingly available in the moment in the woods.

Finally, the deconstructive reader will place all structures in question because an ultimate meaning is always deferred, and ambiguity remains. The purpose is to decenter each new center, to cast doubt on previous theories, never coming to rest on any one meaning but generating an infinite number of possible interpretations. The meaning of the protagonist's experience in "Stopping by Woods," for example, cannot be determined in the long run. The repetition of the last line resists interpretation or provides multiple readings because its metaphoric ramifications remain ambiguous, unclear, full of possibilities, none of them final.

On subsequent readings, new levels of meaning will emerge with the inversion of other binary oppositions. Some will appear only after others have been explored. You may find yourself moving back and forth between different interpretations or successively displacing one with another. In either case, the unending play of difference prevents you from arriving at any decidable meaning, or any set of multiple meanings, for anything you say or write. Instead, there is an unending process, with every new reading holding the possibility of a new interpretation. Acceptance of shifting meanings challenges the previously held views of the reader, offering freedom from the constraints of traditional assumptions and ideologies so that new ways of seeing are made possible.

Nevertheless, deconstructive readings can enrich one's experience with a text by providing an ongoing journey through it, with each journey revealing a new way of thinking about the text. Although such studies proceed in different ways, here are some suggestions to help you read from this perspective and to write about your observations.

Prewriting

A reading log can be particularly helpful with the deconstructive approach. As you go through a text for the first time, you can make notes as a formalist would, taking an interest in how meaning grows out of the work's various stylistic elements. You will identify tensions (in the form of paradox and irony) and be aware of how they are resolved. You will take note of how images, figurative language, and symbols come together to make a unified whole (see Chapter 3). During the second reading, you can set aside your willingness to accept that there is an identifiable, stable meaning produced by the diction, imagery, symbols, and the rest and begin to probe unresolved, unexplained, or unmentioned matters. In your reading log, you should record the undeveloped concerns that would, if they were explored, interrupt the assumed unity and meaning of the text.

The prewriting stage is also a good time to play with the binary oppositions that you find, first identifying those that initially seem most significant, then inferring the ideology that they present. You can recognize them by noting where the text makes a clear distinction between two items of the same genus: black/white (colors), men/women (gender), and so on. You can determine which is privileged by asking what the text accepts as normal, natural, worthy of being or doing. The next step, as noted in "Making a Deconstructive Analysis," is to reverse the terms, thereby creating an inversion of the recognizable world, a new world that is parallel to the world you are used to. This, in turn, allows you to look at the work in an unaccustomed manner. You can also look for contradictions in the binary terms by noting how each defines itself against its opposite or determine how they supplement each other by showing how a term that seems complete in itself is actually derived from something else. Even the most unified act or being is dependent on others for its existence, making all things incomplete or fragmented. It is likely that some of the steps in this process will help you find, in the terms of J. Hillis Miller, "the thread in the text in question which will unravel it all, or the loose stone which will pull down the whole building." And that is an important point because deconstruction works not simply to reverse binaries but also to deconstruct entire hierarchies by illustrating their inherent instability.

Another prewriting activity involves examining the language of the text. You can begin by looking for paradoxes and contradictions, then move on to
examining the figurative language. By making a list of metaphors, for example, you have information that may reveal slippages of the language. Because figures of speech do not mean what they literally say, there is room for them to misstate what the author intended for them to say. You may find it helpful to put the phrases on paper and then play with their possibilities in writing.

A more global view of the text involves looking for shifts in point of view, time, voice, vocabulary, or tone because such shifts may signal that the narrative or the narrator (speaker) of the work is not unified or stable. What seems to be coherent may actually be fraught with contradictions and conflicts. When these cannot be resolved, the text is said to have reached the point at which it deconstructs itself, a point known as aporia.

Much of the prewriting suggested here involves listing and note-making. Although these strategies will aid analysis, they will be helpful in the drafting stage only insofar as they provide ideas and information. Consequently, the more material you can generate at this point, the better off you will be when you begin to write your first draft.

Drafting and Revising

The Introduction Given that deconstructive readings seek to displace previous ones, and sometimes to decenter standard, generally accepted interpretations, one way to open the discussion is to reiterate the conventional reading of a text. In other words, the introduction may simply be a restatement of the usual perception of what a work means or of how it operates. By explaining how a story is usually read or how a character is normally perceived, you have a basis for deconstructing those views. Once you have established what is usually deemed to be so, you are set to state why it is not the only possible reading. Your argument for multiple readings will be the central focus of the body of the discussion that follows, but it is helpful to introduce that idea early on.

The Body Your purpose in the body of your deconstructive analysis will be to demonstrate the limited perspective of the conventional reading. You may want to show how the ideology that the text tries to support is not supportive, an approach that is popular with Marxist and feminist deconstructive critics. In this case, as you study a particular text, you will also be deconstructing the larger contexts in which it exists. You will be suggesting, or overtly stating, that the order supported by it is also open to question, perhaps itself fraught with inconsistencies and illusory stability.

On the other hand, you may be more interested in presenting a series of possible readings, one centering the other in an ongoing process. This approach will take the discussion a step further by showing how meaning is not simply an either–or situation but an unfolding series of possibilities, leaving meaning ultimately beyond deciding. In either case, you will want to demonstrate how and where the text falls apart because of its own inconsistencies, misstatements, or contradictions.

The thinking you did during the prewriting stage will be valuable here, but remember that all assertions need to be supported with quotations and examples drawn from the text. The following questions can help you generate the basis of your discussion. If you developed your prewriting stage thoroughly, you will have already covered some of these questions.

- What is the primary binary opposition in the text?
- What associated binary oppositions do you find?
- Which terms in the oppositions are privileged?
- What elements in the work support the privileged terms?
- What statement of values or beliefs emerges from the privileged terms?
- What elements in the text contradict the hierarchies as presented?
- Where is the statement of values or beliefs contradicted by characters, events, or statements in the text?
- Are the privileged terms inconsistent? Do they present conflicting meanings?
- What associations do you have with the terms that complicate their opposition? That is, what associations keep you from accepting that the terms are all good or all bad?
- What new possibilities of understanding emerge when you reverse the binary oppositions?
- How does the reversal of oppositions tear down the intended statement of meaning?
- What contradictions of language, image, or event do you notice?
- Are there any significant omissions of information?
- Can you identify any irreconcilable views offered as coherent systems?
- What is left unnoticed or unexplained?
- How would a focus on different binary oppositions lead to a different interpretation?
- Where are the figures of speech so ambiguous that they suggest several (perhaps contradictory) meanings?
- What usually overlooked minor figures or events can be examined as major ones?
- How does the focus of meaning shift when you make marginal figures central?
- What new vision of the situation presented by the text emerges for you?
- What new complications do you see that the conventional reading would have "smoothed over"?
- Why can you not make a definitive statement about the meaning of the text?

The Conclusion If you have begun by presenting the conventional reading of the text under analysis, an effective way to end your essay is by comparing that understanding with your deconstructive analysis, pointing out why the earlier one is not definitive. If you prefer, you may reiterate the several different ways in which the text can be read, thereby making the point that meaning is always provisional, always ready to give way to other meanings; and its purpose, significance, or impact in this text.
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Sample Response Paper: Applying Deconstruction to Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery”
19 Aug. 2014

Man’s Humanity to Man

Robert Burns claimed in 1784 in his poem “Man Was Made to Mourn: A Dirge” that “Man’s inhumanity to man / Makes countless thousands mourn” (lines 55-6), ironically characterizing cruelty as an inhuman and primitive trait despite the human tendency to be cruel, which his poem so clearly acknowledged and illustrated. Shirley Jackson, author of the short story “The Lottery,” would disagree with the assumption that cruelty is inhuman. She had no such illusions or expectations of humanity’s essential benevolence. Examined and even reexamined as Deconstruction directs, the story reveals Jackson’s implicit cynicism, but it is unclear whether she’s condemning the human potential for brutality or the mask of civility typically worn to conceal that potential from view. Ultimately, “The Lottery” paints a picture of humans as inherently, naturally cruel and condemns humanity as irredeemably savage despite a veneer of politeness that allows them to maintain the self-conception (or self-delusion) of being civilized.

Without a doubt, the ending of the story paints a clear picture of human brutality. The act of stoning is itself violent, a killing that is enacted up close in which the killer sees and is seen by the victim. In addition, the horror and brutality are heightened by the fact that the ritual requires the participation of the entire village, including children and even the family members of the victim, not just in the selection process but in the killing as well. No one, except the victim, is
exempt from this violence, or blameless for it, as the story illustrates early on by having "[t]he children assemble[] first [as a matter] of course" (963), echoed at the end when "someone gave little Davy Hutchinson a few pebbles" (969). The diminutive phrase "little Davy Hutchinson" is transformed with the addition of "a few pebbles" so that in this context it no longer evokes innocence but culpability, showing us how the community teaches their traditions to the next generation, thus perpetuating those traditions and making sure everyone is equally guilty. The final image of the story is of the village as a mob, descending on Tessie Hutchinson. Notably absent is any sort of metaphor; the villagers are not compared to beasts or monsters. Instead, they are described simply, straight-forwardly as collectively "remember[ing] to use stones" though other parts of the ritual have been forgotten, urging each other on, making choices that reflect individual abilities and tendencies, such as the number and size of stones to use (639), behaviors that are all inescapably human. The savagery, too, then must be recognized and condemned as human.

While the outcome, the stoning of a randomly chosen villager, is horrifyingly cruel, reexamined, the story reveals that an even more significant and insidious cruelty is the matter-of-fact, efficient politeness all the villagers (with the noted exception of Tessie Hutchinson, the chosen victim, only after her selection) wear like a uniform from the beginning to the end of the ritual sacrifice. The opening paragraph with its matter-of-fact description of the village sets this mood:

The morning of June 27th was clear and sunny, with the fresh warmth of a full-summer day; the flowers were blossoming profusely and the grass was richly green. The people of the village began to gather in the square, between the post office and the bank, around ten o'clock; . . . in this village, where there were only
about three hundred people, the whole lottery took less than two hours, so it could
begin at ten o'clock in the morning and still be through in time to allow the
villagers to get home for noon dinner. (Jackson 963)

It’s a pleasant day; the weather cooperates as do the villagers, who gather at the agreed upon
time in the agreed upon place. In subsequent paragraphs, we see them politely, “good
humoredly” (Jackson 965) greeting each other, making small talk, waiting patiently, and
following procedure as instructed and expected. Even Tessie Hutchinson, who, ironically, comes
late, is, nevertheless, on time for the ritual itself and in good humor; Mr. Summers only just
before she arrived had “left off talking and turned to the assembled villagers, . . . cheerfully”
(965) greeting her upon her arrival. Tessie, in turn, responds light-heartedly with a joke:
“Wouldn’t have me leave m’dishes in the sink, now, would you, Joe?” (965). By the end of the
story, the irony and horror of this joke become apparent; Tessie’s final act to tidy her house is
itself an act of politeness, one which she did readily without protest or questioning, as if knowing
she would not return and not wanting to leave her house a mess. This lesser duty is an ironic
foreshadowing of the final one she fulfills, albeit unwillingly, by being sacrificed. The story too
proceeds in a mannerly way. With Tessie’s entrance, the story shifts from long paragraphs of
description to dialogue, and the pacing picks up, the ritual moving more and more rapidly and
efficiently toward its inevitable horrific conclusion, the story politely adhering to its own
imperative, doing what a story must do: introduce, act out, and resolve conflict. “[A]nd then
they were upon her” (969), the last line of the story announces, abruptly renouncing the former
politeness and proper order of the ritual and the story and implicitly condemning them for having
led to this barbarity as if it were the only outcome possible.
Shirley Jackson’s cynicism, reflected in the story’s unapologetic portrait of humanity as irrevocably savage, is deeply disturbing, and it’s understandable why audiences then and now have been both transfixed and outraged by her story. The horror it confronts us with may be a fiction, but that doesn’t negate its truth, especially the potential to recognize ourselves in the villagers. Haven’t we individually and collectively faced situations when we have been silent in the face of injustice, when we have clung to traditions that allowed the perpetuation of injustice, when we have chosen to protect ourselves and preserve our wellbeing by sacrificing other people and their wellbeing, sometimes without question or hesitation? When it comes down to it, their humanity is ours. If Tessie Hutchinson’s final outcry is an ironic protest against the human tendency to allow and perpetuate brutality, meant for us to hear as Jackson’s appeal to us, there seems to be little expectation that we will, in fact, hear it.
Reader-Response Criticism

Preparing to read and write using the lens of Reader-Response Criticism:
Like Deconstruction, Reader-Response Criticism is also a response to New Criticism. Like New Criticism and Deconstruction, Reader-Response Criticism focuses on the close reading/explication and analysis of the text itself and its meaning. (Its key terms/concepts are included below.) Unlike New Criticism, however, it insists on the relevance of the reader’s role in the process of making meaning of the text, and along with the reader comes his or her outside knowledge and life and past reading experience, all of which serve as influences on his or her perception of and response to the text. Reader-Response Criticism assumes that the author, too, is aware of these potential, if not specific, influences and anticipates and even uses them to manipulate the reader.

Therefore, we might understand Reader-Response Criticism as a literary rhetorical analysis, which examines how and why the author manipulates the reader/audience to understand and respond appropriately to the argument of his/her text. Like Deconstruction, we are doing a kind of double-reading. As with New Criticism, we start by looking at how the text makes meaning with the literary devices it uses, focusing especially on the ones we notice. Now, however, we are noticing not just how these patterns make meaning but especially how they are used purposefully—placed or emphasized—so the reader will notice them and how and why they serve to evoke a particular understanding or emotional response in him or her (us): sympathy, empathy, amusement, nostalgia, regret, anger, disgust, etc. So a final step is to ask ourselves why the author wants or needs us to notice, understand, and/or feel this at this moment in the text. How does eliciting this understanding or emotion reveal and fulfill the text’s argument and purpose?

Noticing the point of view is particularly valuable in doing Reader-Response Criticism. Locating ourselves in or in relation to the text forces us to acknowledge and focus on our role in discovering its argument/meaning. So we might ask whose perspective is represented and how it is: directly as s/he is telling the story or describing the scene in first-person or indirectly because the way the situation or characters are described or presented suggests sympathy for this particular character or suggests his or her perception of reality. Are there characters who seem to know more than we do? Does the narrator? Why and so what? What characters, if any, are we made to identify with? How? Why? Note: Identifying with a character or characters is not the same as sympathizing with him/her or them. We don’t necessarily like or approve of characters we (are made to) identify with; we just see the text’s reality from their viewpoint. If, in contrast, we are kept on the outside, how and why is this accomplished? How does the point of view and perspective of the text (and the relative placement of the reader within the text) reveal the text’s argument and fulfill its purpose?

Final note:
The claim in a Reader-Response Criticism essay focuses on the role or significance of the reader in “making” (understanding) the text’s meaning (argument) or an appropriate response to it, thereby fulfilling its purpose. Alternatively, the claim might focus on the author’s awareness of and manipulation of the reader, as evidenced in the text, to communicate his/her argument and fulfill his/her purpose. As with any good claim, it must be specific and unified.

Read over the following pages to gain a better understanding of Reader-Response Criticism and how to apply it to your literary analysis:
Key Terms/Concepts:

Most terms are defined in the “Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms” at the end of Reading and Writing about Literature by Janet E. Gardner and/or in the body of the book itself (see the index at the end of the book). Those that aren’t defined are defined below, and some that are defined are given more explanation.

1. Diction: abstract and concrete language, denotation, connotation
   a. etymology: the history of a word. Detailed information on the history of words can be found in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) which can be useful in determining a word’s specific meaning or meanings at the time it was used.

2. Allusion

3. Literal language

4. Figurative language

5. Imagery/image conveys sensory experience in essence by creating that sensation or object in the reader’s imagination (often sight but also sound, smell, taste, touch, motion. Images can be literal or figurative. See below.)

6. A literal image depicts what it names: a chair, grass, a weeping willow.

7. A figurative image suggests the essence of a thing by comparing it to the sight, sound, etc., of something else. Figures of speech, such as metaphors and similes, are generally images though not always.

8. Figure of speech: metaphor, simile, metonymy, synecdoche, personification, symbol, synesthesia, allegory, hyperbole, understatement, paradox, oxymoron.

9. Mimesis means imitation (mimicry) or representation (see Imitation in the glossary), in this case, literature imitating or representing life. Texts reflect or represent—in their form, structure, imagery, etc.—the real, natural, and/or human experience they depict, enabling or compelling readers to share that experience. Often, the reader’s experience of the text or response to it is made to mimic the characters’.

10. Sound: alliteration, cacophony, euphony, consonance, assonance, onomatopoeia

11. Motifs are the repeated or recurrent patterns—words, phrases, images, objects, sounds, scenes, structures, concepts, themes, etc.,—that unify the text and work together to communicate its meaning, effect, and/or purpose.

12. Ambiguity in literature is found in words, statements, or situations, etc., that have more than one possible meaning. These possibilities make the text more complex and interesting and more meaningful, and are analyzed to reveal their effect and purpose.

13. Irony: dramatic, situational, verbal

14. Unity is the oneness or coherence of a text—short story, poem, novel, play—seen in the way its parts or elements work together to create a sense of it as an organic whole.

15. Tension occurs between seemingly contradictory elements of the text—irony, ambiguity, paradox—contradictions, which the reader/critic must resolve or reconcile in order to make meaning and to make of the text a unified whole. These elements that resist unity do not detract from a text but rather signal its greater complexity, interest, and significance.

16. Point of View

17. Narrator

18. Voice

19. Speaker

20. Tone

21. Character

22. Protagonist

23. Antagonist

24. Structure/Form
25. *Pace/Pacing is the speed at which a text moves due to its form and content, often
determined by the length, and its variety or monotony, of a line or sentence, stanza or
paragraph, and section, chapter, or scene, and in prose the use of description or exposition
versus dialogue, and in drama the length of characters' lines in a scene, etc., including
silences and actions, etc. Syntax (sentence structure) and sentence types as well as
rhythm/sound and diction also have an impact on pacing.
26. +Plot: climax, denouement. Short stories according to Alice Adams, typically follow
ABDCE structure: action, background, development (movement of the plot forward,
physically or psychologically), climax (or turning points), ending. Not all stories follow
this order though most have all of these elements. Similarly, while plot in drama
traditionally includes prologue or exposition, rising action, complication, climax, falling
action, and catastrophe or denouement, not all plays follow this order or include all steps
discretely, and modern plays may conform more to the ABDCE structure, again with
some steps rearranged or merged.
27. Conflict
28. Flashback
29. Foreshadowing
30. Juxtaposition
31. Description
32. Exposition
33. Dialogue
34. Setting
35. *Defamiliarization is the way in New Criticism a text makes the familiar seem strange
and thereby makes the reader aware of and open to new understanding of his or her
reality as if he or she is seeing it for the first time.
The Text Acts on the Reader. When you examine how a text controls the reader’s responses, you acknowledge that the text is a powerful manipulator. As Henry James once commented, “In every novel the work is divided between the writer and the reader, but the writer makes the reader very much as he makes his characters.”

To examine a text by looking for how it produces certain effects on a reader means to look at it in much the same way that the group of critics known as the structuralists do (see Chapter 8). Both reader-response critics and the structuralists assume that because readers come to a work with a certain literary competence, or what Jonathan Culler called a set of shared reading conventions, they recognize signals that they are accustomed to finding there. They then use these signals to make the expected interpretation. Both groups know how they are expected to respond, and they react accordingly. They use the familiar cues to make new interpretations. Thus, looking at the text to see how it causes readers to react in certain ways involves asking how the codes, signs, signals, and rules work together to produce meaning. It entails examining the relationships among the parts in an effort to define the system—known as the grammar—that governs them. The able reader recognizes the grammar because of her own life experiences and her reading background.

If the meaning of a text is recognizable because “informed” readers know the accepted conventions that underlie it, then a work cannot be subject to an infinite number of interpretations. This means that it is less important for readers to record their personal responses than it is to make generalizations about how interpretation is governed by the system under which the text was written. Although critics who have a structuralist bent recognize that different readers will produce different interpretations, they focus on the regularities they find in readers’ strategies. Such generalizations also extend beyond the text in question, for the text is not autonomous; it exists in the context of other texts, with which it shares common elements and, hence, meanings.

It is important to realize that sometimes an author can use recognizable conventions to “fool” the reader. As Stanley Fish pointed out in Surprised by Sin (1998), a text can use predictable responses, such as the expectations typically evoked by a particular genre, to cause readers to make interpretations that later prove to be wrong. Consequently, readers must be sophisticated enough to make adjustments to their interpretations as needed.

If you are primarily interested in how the text controls your response, you will want to examine how it shows you what you should be thinking and feeling as it unfolds. This may involve considering the author’s intention and how it was carried out. Certainly it will entail looking closely at each element of the work for what it implies about the reader’s behavior.

In “The Masque of the Red Death,” for example, the reader gradually moves from enjoyment of (and vicarious participation in) the lighthearted revelries of the courtiers to “unutterable horror” at the final “dominion” of the Red Death. The isolation of the setting, the images of silence and darkness, and the diction (“gaudy,” “fantastic,” “blood-tinted pane,” “ghastly,” “grotesque,” “delirious fancies,” “bizarre”) imply a world in which madness is the norm and the supernatural rules. Indeed, every component of the story—plot structure, patterns of expectation and satisfaction or expectation and disappointment, characterization, revelations and reversals, contrasting elements, image, symbol, figurative language, tone—contributes to the mounting uneasiness and final terror experienced by the reader. Consider, for example, the description of the rooms, one small element of the tale. The progress through each of the seven (a magical number) chambers disquiet the reader. The rooms are “irregularly disposed,” we are told, with a “sharp turn at every twenty or thirty yards.” Their colors, repeated in the stained glass windows to produce a claustrophobic effect, move in a disturbing sequence—from blue to purple, then green, orange, white, violet, and finally black—that is accentuated by windowpanes of “scarlet—a deep blood color.” It is a sequence that begins with suggested innocence (blue) and ends in mystery and death (black and blood color). Or consider the effect of the contrasting sounds in the story. We are told, for example, that “the wild music of the orchestra” and light laughter of the dancers are interrupted when the hour is “stucken” (a word that carries the suggestion of illness) by the ebony clock, which has a sound that is “clear and loud and deep and exceedingly musical, but of so peculiar a note and emphasis that . . . the giddiest grew pale.” The sound of the clock is made even more ominous by its contrast with the jovial noises of the partygoers and its effect on them. All the information given is disposed to create in the reader a sense of the fantastic that is threatening and dangerous.

To examine how a text controls a reader’s response, you will find it helpful to ask questions such as these:

- What did the author intend for you to feel while reading this work, and how did he or she make you feel it?
- What are you dependent on in this work to help you make sense of what you read—descriptive passages, the narrator’s voice, contrasting viewpoints of characters?
- Do the events fall into a pattern you have seen before?
- Are there opposites in the text that surprise you? Inform you? Keep you from anticipating what is coming?
- How do your previous experiences with this genre set up your expectations for how this text will operate?
- What images and events in the story are you already conditioned to approve or disapprove?
- How does the point of view affect (or control) your understanding?
- What information has been withheld from you? How does that affect your inferences?
- What similarities do you recognize between this work and other works—for example, in terms of themes, setting, characters?
How does the text call upon what you know of the world to produce your response to the work?
Did the work cause you to make interpretations that you had to revise later?
What events or experiences were you led to anticipate? What mysteries were you asked to solve? What judgments were you expected to make?

The Reader Acts on the Text  When the focus is turned directly on the reader as the chief source of interpretation, all of your thoughts, experiences, fantasies, and beliefs play a part in creating meaning. You will bring to a text a multitude of qualities that are yours alone: expectations, prejudices, stock responses, values, personal experiences, gender, age, past readings, even the circumstances of the present reading. These forces, according to Norman Holland, make a given work serve "highly personal, even idiosyncratic ends."

When so much importance is placed on individual responses or those of interpretive communities, it almost seems as if a text can mean anything a reader says it means. It is critical to remember, then, that "wrong" readings can exist even when the reader is using the reader-response model. Mistaking one word for another or misunderstanding the definition of a word, for example, can lead a reader to make inferences that are clearly off the mark. Although a variety of interpretations of a single work are possible using this approach, some simply will not fit. To make sure your interpretation is on point, ask yourself how much of it includes various features of the text and how much of it deals with aspects that do not reflect the text.

The following questions can help you discover your role in creating the texts you read:
- What did you expect to feel while reading this work?
- What was unsettling in what you read?
- How did you adapt to what made you uncomfortable so that it more clearly fit with what you desired?
- With what or whom did you most closely identify in the work? What identification gave you the most pleasure? The most displeasure?
- Did the work fit your picture of the way life is?
- What adjustments did you have to make so that the work did not challenge the world as you know it?
- What does the work fail to tell you about characters and/or events? What imaginary or personal material did you use to supply what was missing?
- What memories does this work recall for you?

What kind of reader is implied by this text? For example, does it address you as if you are intelligent and well informed, or as if you are inexperienced and innocent?
- What aspects of the text invite you to respond as the implied reader?
- How do you, as an actual reader, differ from the one that is implied?
- What gaps and vague outlines did you find yourself filling in?
- How did your perceptions and responses change as the work unfolded?
- What caused them to change?
- What contradictions did you perceive in the texts—for example, characters who represent differing viewpoints? How did you resolve them?
- What do you know of the author's intent?
- List the most vivid images you remember from the text. How have you reconstructed them from your own experiences?
- What experiences of your own have you used to visualize and understand those presented in the text?

**WRITING A READER-RESPONSE ANALYSIS**

**Prewriting**
To find a starting point for exploring where your personal experience and the text converge, you will find it helpful to make a few personal observations before, during, and after reading the text. These observations will help you discover interpretive points for discussion. It is easy to begin; simply ask questions such as these before you even pick up the book:
- How do I feel about reading this piece? Am I eager to begin? Curious about what I will find? Reluctant?
- What do I already know about this work or this author?
- What do I already know about the time, place, or characters depicted?
- What does the title suggest to me?
Noting your responses in a journal or log during a first reading can help you make generalizations later. You may still be at the questioning stage when you do this, or your ideas may have reached an advanced degree of development. Regardless of how far along you are in your thinking, here are some suggestions to consider during the initial reading:

- Does the work include quotations that I would like to copy and save? What questions would I like to ask the author?
- What objections can I raise to what I am reading?
- Where do I experience confusion, disagreement, approval, or any other attitude or feeling?
- What experiences does the text bring to mind that I can describe or narrate?

You can also make short responses after the first reading. These responses may be appropriate for a journal entry, or you may write them as separate texts.

As soon as you finish reading the work, describe how you feel about it.

Write a brief summary of the plot.

Rewrite a single line from a poem or about a sentence from a piece of prose.

Identify a line or an image that immediately caught your attention or that you remember clearly. Why do you find it to be powerful?

Think of someone or some experience that a character or situation in this work brings to mind.

List the things you like about the work. Why do you like them?

List those aspects of it that bother you. Why do they bother you?

Identify any passages you do not understand.

Choose what you would tell someone about this work if you could make only one comment.

Consider how you might have acted had you been one of the characters.

What else would you like to know about the characters or events?

What values, beliefs, or assumptions of your own does this work affirm? Which of your values, beliefs, or assumptions does it challenge?

Compose a letter (not to be sent) to the author or to one of the characters.

Speculate on who should play the various roles in a filmed version of the work.

Drafting and Revising

The Introduction. Because you are making a reader-response analysis, it is appropriate to involve your audience in the introduction to your essay. In other words, try to provoke a strong response from your own reader. One way of doing so is to begin by recounting an incident from the work that elicits a particularly powerful reaction or quote a passage that holds strong emotion for most readers. For example, Edgar Allan Poe's description of the mysterious stranger who suddenly appears at the ball in "The Masque of the Red Death"—"The figure was tall and gaunt, and shrouded from head to foot in the habiliments of the grave"—is not likely to provoke an insensitive yawn from anyone who reads it. It can send shivers down the spine of even the most passive reader. An essay that begins by quoting such a line will catch a reader's attention; it can also effectively lead into a more detailed examination of how the reader and text are responsible for making the literary work.

The Body. The core of your paper will explain how the text controls the reader's understanding and sympathies, identify the personal material you have put into the text, and describe how the two interact to create the text. In other words, it will show how you acquired information about the text and what responses that information created.

Part of your discussion, then, will center on the guidelines embodied in the text. It will note stereotypes, points of view, connotations, patterns, metaphors, foreshadowing, and images that guide your responses. It will question the accuracy of the information that is given and the reliability of the various characters who provide that information. It will remark on those instances in which only partial information is provided and where the reader knows more than the characters know. Even points at which the reader is misled will be significant.

You may want to describe your general impression of the work or how your initial impression of it changed to become your final judgment. You may even want to point out what you have found that was recognizable from your own experiences, both personal and literary. Note any incidents and characters that produced either validation of or challenge to your sense of the world (noticeable because of your own comfort or discomfort on meeting them). It may be helpful to profile the character with whom you most closely identified or the incident that gave you the most pleasure or pain. If you found yourself remembering a personal experience that made the text more credible or moving, you will want to include it here. If you supplied material by imagining events that did not actually take place, you should mention any fantasies or speculations that helped explain a character's motivation or enhance a bit of action. If you made adjustments in how you initially saw the text so that it was more in keeping with your usual way of seeing things, you will have a direct means of discovering your part in making this text. Even the expectations you had before reading it may be significant in explaining how you created the work.

Finally, you should explain what resulted when the text and the reader came together. You may want to note how the text invites responses by predisposing the reader to read in certain ways, and you might examine how the images provided by the text are modified by the reader's personal experience. Although the text provides certain norms or values, it is the reader who decides whether or not to what degree they should be accepted or rejected. The critic's job is to raise meaningful questions and to look for meaningful answers. In the process, a new reading of the text may emerge, and the reader may be changed as well.

The Conclusion. The body of your analysis will have presented numerous observations backed up by even more citations from the text. The conclusion, then, is the place to pull all the disparate pieces of information together into generalizations about the text. It need not be lengthy, but it should state the major effects the work has had on a reader and the causes that produced those effects. Finally, the conclusion should include an evaluation of how effectively the text elicited the desired responses, how deeply the reader became involved in constructing the text, and how the work was enriched by the mutual participation of text and reader. In other words, how well did the process work?
Man’s Humanity to Man

Robert Burns claimed in 1784 in his poem “Man Was Made to Mourn: A Dirge” that “Man’s inhumanity to man / Makes countless thousands mourn” (lines 55-6), ironically characterizing cruelty as an inhuman and primitive trait despite the human tendency to be cruel, which his poem so clearly acknowledged and illustrated. Shirley Jackson, author of the short story “The Lottery,” would disagree with the assumption that cruelty is inhuman. She had no such illusions or expectations of humanity’s essential benevolence. Using the lens of Reader-Response Criticism, the reader can’t help but notice and react to Jackson’s implicit cynicism. Indeed, her story “The Lottery” paints a picture of humanity as inherently, naturally cruel and condemns humanity as ultimately irredeemably savage.

However, Shirley Jackson goes to considerable lengths to paint a picture of normal everyday life in “The Lottery.” Looking at what Jackson chooses to present, we must acknowledge that nothing on the surface on first reading suggests the brutality of the end. The title intimates that something is going to happen, but this thing is left unspecified, and the word lottery itself implies something positive, not something ominous. It is, after all, a nice June morning, June 27th to be exact, in this unnamed village (963). It is a friendly village. People greet each other with smiles and warm words. The children are inventive, independent, and industrious. Already three of the boys have “made a great pile of stones in one corner of the
square” (964), and the reader is allowed to believe, for the moment, in the innocence of their purpose. This illusion of normalcy, of innocence is ultimately dispelled as we read at the end: “The children had stones already, and someone gave little Davy Hutchinson a few pebbles” (969). The deception Jackson has perpetrated on us is made all the more poignant because of our realization that our foolishness stems, not from what Jackson omitted—the stones were there all along—but from what we have added to the story: that is, our own assumptions and desires, what we wanted to see. We will not be so gullible upon a second, closer reading. So if we look back to the beginning of the story, we might notice that fine June day no longer seems so innocent. We might note, for example, the urgency that the precision of the date and timing of the lottery lends to the occasion. We might also look again at those friendly villagers and see that the way “[the men] stood together, away from the pile of stones,” along with the fact that “their jokes were quiet and they smiled rather than laughed” (964) suggests their nervousness, and this nervousness, in turn, indicates their awareness that this is no ordinary day. Of course, we cannot be expected to deduce the ending from these few vague clues, and while the clues do become steadily more frequent and explicit, Jackson is, in fact, relying upon our prolonged blindness to make us see what we do not want to see. Throughout the story, we are allowed to remain separate, distant from the characters, safe in the knowledge that we are not they. This, then, is the ultimate horror, that finally, we are forced to see our blindness as parallel to the villagers’ inability or unwillingness to see the true nature and injustice of the lottery. So Jackson compels us to see that her deception is, in fact, accomplished by us, by our tendency—not confined to our response to this one fiction—to accept blindly what is presented, whether by the author or by our society, as normal, and that it is in just this way, in this practice of self-deception, that we are like these villagers. Like them, we protect ourselves from unpleasant truths, thereby allowing
them to continue, and while we may look on in horror, we do look on; we read to the end of the
story, in a sense allowing the brutality to happen. Aren’t we, then, just as bloodthirsty and
savage as the villagers?

Shirley Jackson’s cynicism, reflected in the story’s unapologetic portrait of humanity as
irrevocably savage, is deeply disturbing, and it’s understandable why audiences then and now
have been both transfixed and outraged by her story. The horror it confronts us with may be a
fiction, but that doesn’t negate its truth, especially the potential to recognize ourselves in the
villagers. Haven’t we individually and collectively faced situations when we have been silent in
the face of injustice, when we have clung to traditions that allowed the perpetuation of injustice,
when we have chosen to protect ourselves and preserve our wellbeing by sacrificing other people
and their wellbeing, sometimes without question or hesitation? When it comes down to it, their
humanity is ours. If Tessie Hutchinson’s final outcry is an ironic protest against the human
tendency to allow and perpetuate brutality, meant for us to hear as Jackson’s appeal to us, there
seems to be little expectation that we will, in fact, hear it.
Psychological Criticism

Preparing to read and write using the lens of Psychological Criticism:
Psychological Criticism is concerned with understanding and explaining human nature. When taking a psychological approach to literature, therefore, it is natural to focus on individual characters or types of characters (or anything that reflects human existence) and to examine characters’ conscious and unconscious behavior, actions, motivations, possessions, surroundings, personality traits, perception, imagination, interactions, conversations, relationships, and/or conflicts between characters and within characters, including inherent inconsistencies or contradictions. Observations are discovered and proved by doing a close reading/analysis and interpretation of the text. Thus Psychological Criticism also depends upon the practices and sometimes some of the concepts of New Criticism.

Psychological Criticism has its historical roots in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Freudian psychoanalytical criticism especially but also in Jungian mythological criticism. *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms* explains Freudian and Jungian Psychoanalytic Criticism:

Freud’s theories are directly and indirectly concerned with the nature of the unconscious mind, ... suggesting that the powers motivating men and women are mainly and normally unconscious. He also identified three components of the human psyche: the id, the inborn, unconscious part of the psyche and the source of our instinctual physical (especially libidinal desires); the superego, which internalizes the norms and mores of society and almost seems outside the self, making moral judgments and counseling sacrifice regardless of self-interest; and the ego, the predominantly rational orderly, and conscious part of the psyche that mediates the often competing demands of the id and the superego. The id, insatiable and pleasure-seeking, is ruled by the pleasure principle; the ego, based on the reality principle, must choose between or balance liberation and self-gratification on one hand and censorship and conformity on the other. (411-2)

[In contrast to Freud’s focus] on the individual unconscious, ... Jung [a student of Freud] identified and concentrated on a collective unconscious that, he claimed, is universally shared by people across cultures. According to Jung, this collective unconscious contains racial memories and archetypes, primordial images and patterns, that reflect the elemental content of human experience from its earliest beginnings. (260)

In practicing Psychoanalytic Criticism, you might examine how one or several related terms from one the Freudian or Jungian theories applies to and explains a character, characters, type of characters, or human nature in general in a particular text or texts. (Important terms from both Freudian and Jungian theories are presented and defined in the following pages along with possible questions to help focus one’s reading/writing.) However, the purpose is not just to use the terms or to prove they apply but to use them to reveal, prove, and analyze/interpret the text’s argument about human psychology.

Typically, it is easier and likely to be more successful, especially in short papers like all the ones written for this class, to focus on an individual character (or several similar characters) than to look at different types of characters or generally at human nature. With one character, one can truly delve into his or her motivations, desires, actions, personality traits, prized possessions (as
personal symbols), etc. So one might ask whether the person is typically nurturing, self-destructive, self-centered/selfish, self-effacing, attention or approval-seeking, etc., how, why, and so what. Similarly, one might ask what the character most wants and how he or she demonstrates and acts on this desire and again why and so what.

Remember it is not enough just to describe the character or to list all of your observations; they must be connected to and in support of a unified argument the text is making about him or her or about human nature through him or her. Also, it’s important to remember the purpose is not to judge or express personal opinions about the character and/or the character’s actions but to understand and explain the character and/or his or her actions.

Final note:
The claim in a Psychological Criticism essay identifies and proves one explanation of (argument about) human nature the text makes. An essay and claim could focus narrowly on one character and an explanation of his or her personality or motivation or interactions, etc., or more broadly on one type of character/motivation, or most broadly on one defining aspect of human nature, according to the text. As with any good claim, it must be specific and unified.

Key Terms/Concepts:

Freudian terminology:

The conscious—the actual contents of awareness; i.e., what one is conscious of at a given moment.

The preconscious—the entire set of contents of the mind accessible to consciousness but not in awareness at the moment, i.e., what is descriptively unconscious but not blocked from access by repression or other psychological defenses.

The unconscious—the vast, unknowable part of the mind or mental processes not accessible to consciousness by direct means, i.e., by turning attention to them. Their existence must thus be inferred through examination of gaps in consciousness, symptoms, dreams, etc. since they are blocked from consciousness by repression.

Censorship—the means of keeping unpleasant (or unsociable) desires out of consciousness. Censorship is circumvented through dreams, parapraxes (or “slips of the tongue”), and figures of speech.

Repression—a way of dealing with painful or unsociable desires; they are relocated in the unconscious where they indirectly continue to influence daily life and dreams.

Libido, instinct, or drive—inate and biological urge, energy, or desire that is derived from the id and seeks satisfaction in objects. E.g., one might have an “instinctual” desire for food or sex.

The id is centered on instinct, primal biological impulses, pleasures, desires, unchecked urges, and wish fulfillment. It is totally unconscious and internally focused and works according to the pleasure-principle.
The ego—When Freud refers to the ego, he is talking about our conscious self, aware of who we are. The ego helps us deal with reality by mediating among the id, the superego, and the demands of the outside world. The ego prevents us from acting on every urge we have (produced by the id) and being so morally driven (by superego) that we can’t function properly. The ego works according to the reality-principle.

The superego—the largely unconscious part of the personality responsible for moral self-control—roughly, the “conscience.” The super-ego is internalized self-criticism, an internalization of the voice of the father or authority.

The pleasure-principle—the desire for immediate gratification. Quite simply, the pleasure-principle drives one to seek pleasure and to avoid pain.

The reality-principle—the deferral of gratification. As one grows up, one begins to learn the need sometimes to endure pain and to defer gratification because of the exigencies and obstacles of reality.

Sublimation—literally, “raising up” (toward the “sublime”). Freud discusses “sublimation” as a process of redirecting psychical energy from ego-desire (e.g., sexual gratification) to the satisfaction of cultural aims (e.g., work, art, politics).

Ideal demands—the requirements of civilization to live in a way that will contribute to the “perfect” functioning of civilization. E.g., “Love thy neighbor as thy self”

Eros and Thanatos—Freud identifies two drives that both coincide and conflict within the individual and among individuals. Eros is the drive of life, love, creativity, and sexuality, self-satisfaction, and species preservation. Thanatos, from the Greek word for “death” is the drive of aggression, sadism, (self and species) destruction, violence, and death.

Jungian terminology:

Personal conscious—a state of awareness of the present moment. Once that moment has passed, it moves into the realm of the personal unconscious.

Personal unconscious—a storehouse of past personal experience no longer extant in the personal conscious.

Collective unconscious—the inherited experience of the human race that resides at a deep level of the psyche. Its contents come from recurrent life situations that are common to all human beings.

The ego is the conscious mind.

Archetypes—inherited ideas or ways of thinking generated by the experiences of the human race that exist in the unconscious of an individual. They are universal and recurring images, patterns, or motifs that represent typical human experience and often in appear in literature, art, fairy tales, myths, dreams, and rituals, for example, the hero, the scapegoat, the outcast, water, the sun, the quest or journey, death and rebirth, etc.
Shadow—the dark, unattractive aspects of the self that reside in the personal unconscious. An individual’s impulse is to reject the shadow and project it onto someone or something else.

Persona—the social mask that an individual constructs and wears to face others. It is a blending of what the person is and what society expects him or her to be. It is the being that other people know as one’s self.

Anima/Animus is the life force that causes one to act. It is given a feminine designation (anima) in men and a masculine one (animus) in women, indicating that the psyche has both male and female characteristics. While typically a man will identify with and integrate masculine archetypes and their unconscious influences into his personal conscious, he will project the feminine archetypes onto women. Similarly, a woman will typically identify with and integrate feminine archetypes and their influences into her personal conscious and will project the masculine archetypes onto men.

The self—The goal of life is to realize the self (through individuation). The self is the most important archetype and represents the unity of opposites so that every aspect of personality is expressed equally: male and female, ego and shadow, good and bad, conscious and unconscious. When one is young, the focus is on the ego and the trivialities of the persona. When one is older (assuming one has been developing as one should), the focus is a little deeper, on the self, and the individual becomes closer to all people, all life, even the universe itself. The self-realized person is actually less selfish.

Questions to Ask Yourself When Preparing to Write a Psychological Criticism Paper:

What are a particular character’s main trait or traits? What main traits does the protagonist or antagonist exhibit? In what behavior or speech patterns, perceptions/thoughts, or descriptions of the character, etc. are these traits manifested?

How self-aware is the character? Are the characters’ behaviors and treatment of others conscious or unconscious? How do you know? What indicates the character’s awareness/purposefulness or lack thereof?

Does the character seem to resemble a particular archetype?

How does the character see him or herself? How do others perceive him or her? Does his/her self-perception match others’ perceptions of him or her?

Does the character change? How? To what extent? Does the character’s understanding or self-awareness grow or change? How? To what extent? In what do you see this change or growth? What causes it?

What images or symbols are associated with the character?

What experiences and relationships have affected the character and made him/her the person s/he is?

Does the character have any internal conflicts? Is s/he at war with him or herself? Over what?
What motivates the character? What does the character (most) want from a significant other or society? How does the character go about getting what s/he wants?

Is the character self-destructive?

Is the character self-aggrandizing or self-deprecating or self-sacrificing? To what extent? What demonstrates this attitude toward self?
Lisa Esther
Yanover
English 123
Sample Response Paper: Applying Psychological Criticism to Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery”
19 Aug. 2014

Man’s Humanity to Man

Robert Burns claimed in 1784 in his poem “Man Was Made to Mourn: A Dirge” that “Man’s inhumanity to man / Makes countless thousands mourn” (lines 55-6), ironically characterizing cruelty as an inhuman and primitive trait despite the human tendency to be cruel, which his poem so clearly acknowledged and illustrated. Shirley Jackson, author of the short story “The Lottery,” would disagree with the assumption that cruelty is inhuman. She had no such illusions or expectations of humanity’s essential benevolence. Examined through the lens of Psychological Criticism, her story “The Lottery” paints a picture of humanity as inherently, naturally cruel and condemns humanity as ultimately irredeemably savage.

Tessie Hutchinson, the victim, doesn’t emerge blameless either. Her status as victim makes her pitiable but no less culpable for the barbaric ritual she participates in, seemingly without protest or questioning, up until the moment she personally is at risk. Tessie’s role helps reveal and explain Shirley Jackson’s view of human nature and understanding of why injustice happens and continues to happen because of human nature. The individual’s fear of the mob, of the repercussions of being singled out and ostracized by it and thus made vulnerable to it, is at the heart of the individual’s silence and inaction. At the end of the story, the individual’s fears seem justified as we see “Tessie Hutchinson . . . in the center of a cleared space, . . . her hands out desperately as the villagers moved in on her” (969), her final protest unheeded, unheard.
What Jackson is revealing and condemning is the complete lack of protest earlier. It’s not that she doesn’t understand the villagers’ collective and individual silence; the individual has reason to fear the mob. The mob is large—two hundred ninety-nine people large, in this case—and the individual is (made to feel) powerless, dependent on belonging to that community/mob for protection but then also subject to its laws and customs. This practice of making the individual dependent on society (and mindful of that dependence) is ancient, dating back to Anglo-Saxon law in which, being found guilty of a crime, an individual could be labeled an “outlaw” and thus removed from the protection of the law, meaning anyone could kill him or her without fear of retribution, and indeed this practice seems to be what the ritual of “The Lottery” is enacting though not in response to any crime or wrongdoing on the part of the individual, simply as a matter of course, of tradition, but ultimately to keep the individual in line. Ironically, the need to instill this fear in the individual reveals society’s implicit belief that the uncontrolled individual is to be feared. So Jackson hints at the potential of the individual to voice protest and enact change but simultaneously highlights the fear and selfishness that make that action impossible. Tessie Hutchinson does protest but too late, only after she has been made an outcast, which effectively silences her; she is dead to the community before the first stone hits her. Because her voice is no longer one of theirs, the villagers do not hear her protest, and because her protest is not against the larger injustice but selfishly motivated, the reader does not hear it either. Thus Jackson points to human nature as the root cause of the perpetuation of human savagery.

Shirley Jackson’s cynicism, reflected in the story’s unapologetic portrait of humanity as irrevocably savage, is deeply disturbing, and it’s understandable why audiences then and now have been both transfixed and outraged by her story. The horror it confronts us with may be a fiction, but that doesn’t negate its truth, especially the potential to recognize ourselves in the
villagers. Haven't we individually and collectively faced situations when we have been silent in the face of injustice, when we have clung to traditions that allowed the perpetuation of injustice, when we have chosen to protect ourselves and preserve our wellbeing by sacrificing other people and their wellbeing, sometimes without question or hesitation? When it comes down to it, their humanity is ours. If Tessie Hutchinson's final outcry is an ironic protest against the human tendency to allow and perpetuate brutality, meant for us to hear as Jackson's appeal to us, there seems to be little expectation that we will, in fact, hear it.
Cultural Criticism: New Historicism

Preparing to read and write using the lens of New Historicism:
New Historicism examines how a text reflects and comments on its context as well as how its context informs or adds to our understanding of the text's meaning and purpose. Context refers to both biographical information about the author, including his or her background as well as social, political, economic situations or issues, etc., the author was aware of, interested in, or affected by, and information about the text's setting, both the time and place depicted in the text as well as the time and place in which it was written, which often but not always are one and the same. (Some New Historicism critics also consider the context of audiences in subsequent eras, considering how the meaning and purpose of the text as well as the response to it can change with the context. In this way, New Historicism overlaps with Reader-Response Criticism.)

New Historicism, belonging to Cultural Criticism and informed by Feminist and Marxist Criticism as well as Deconstruction, rejects the possibility of absolute truth or unified meaning. New Historicism, unlike traditional Historicism, thus does not concern itself with proving that events in the texts really did happen or people in them really did exist. Instead, it questions whose stories get told and whose voices get heard and conversely whose are silenced in the existing narratives and to what effect.

Unlike New Criticism, Deconstruction, and Reader-Response Criticism, New Historicism requires research and comes with the obligation to avoid plagiarism by adhering to MLA style practices, including careful, correct, and consistent use of parenthetical in-text citation and a matching complete and correct Works Cited page for all sources, whether paraphrasing, summarizing, or quoting them. (Note: When using primary sources, it is necessary to provide correct and consistent in-text citation; however, a Works Cited page is not required in this course.) In addition, research requires careful selection and evaluation of secondary sources (Wikipedia or study guides like SparkNotes are never appropriate) to ensure that the sources are credible, reliable, and legitimate. Just as legitimate sources support and strengthen your argument and credibility, inappropriate sources damage and weaken your argument and credibility.

Even though New Historicism uses research, the research is not instead of close reading/analysis and interpretation of the text but in service to that analysis/interpretation. Thus, the research is not the focus or emphasis of the essay and is not separate from your analysis/argument but integrated into it, used to set up the argument in the introduction and/or to support the argument in the body. Ultimately, the purpose is not simply to report the historical or biographical information but to use it to uncover and understand the text's meaning and purpose and to prove and deepen your argument about it. In addition, it is not enough for your argument to focus on and prove that the text really is about a particular historical situation or person (though you do need to prove any correspondence you claim); instead, it needs to prove and explain what that correspondence reveals about the meaning and purpose of the text.

Final note:
The claim of your New Historicism response paper or essay will focus on a single specific, unified argument about the text's meaning and/or purpose, which is either revealed by or supported by the research.

Read over the following pages to gain a better understanding of New Historicism and how to apply it to your literary analysis:
AN OVERVIEW OF CULTURAL STUDIES

Part of the difficulty in defining cultural studies, or even culture for that matter, is that the terms are so inclusive. If culture refers to the sum of the beliefs, institutions, arts, and behaviors of a particular people or time, then cultural studies can be said to address an almost unthinkably broad body of knowledge: language, customs, legal systems, literature, and more. Sometimes such a study is even interested in the culture of those who have responded to it. As it usually proceeds, however, a cultural study will address a particular topic, such as “Hispanic Women Writers of Texas,” using the cultural context to arrive at generalizations about that topic. The intent is to connect historical, social, and economic knowledge surrounding the topic, a topic that may not seem to be very literary at all. Because any context is virtually unending, the critic never knows enough. As a result, interpretations made from a cultural studies perspective tend to be opened and continue to evolve as they are affected by new information. Nevertheless, a few generalizations can be made.

For the most part, groups engaged in cultural studies share the assumption that within any society there is a dominant group that determines what is acceptable and what is unacceptable for the larger body. It defines the culture’s tastes and values—in short, its ideology. Cultural critics are interested in those groups of people who do not belong to the dominant parties and who challenge the hegemony of the powerful. In the world of literature, they are the people. Antonio Gramsci called subordinate writers. However, wherever there is dominance, there is also, to some degree, defiance that makes it impossible for the powerful to prevent change indefinitely. Recognizing that subjects (people) are socially constructed, cultural critics work to change power structures where they are unequal, making the subjugated and marginalized more visible and influential makers of the culture. As James Berlin put it, “The subject is the point of intersection of various discourses—discourses about class, race, gender, ethnicity, age, religion, and the like—and it is influenced by those discourses.” Consequently, it is necessary to examine signifying practices in the formation of subjectivities within concrete material, social, and political conditions. Such a focus makes the field a highly politicized one, dedicated, as it is, to examining cultural forces in both literature and life with the intent of changing the way power is conceived.

NEW LITERARY HISTORICISM

Not surprisingly, such radical departures from the traditional ways of looking at history change the way we read literature. In fact, it should be noted that most of the new historicists are literary scholars. Under their aegis, the concept that a text imitates life—that it reflects its historical context—has either disappeared or been seriously changed. Gone are those approaches that used history, even history of the text, as background to literature and that saw the work as a replication of a period’s people and behavior (see Chapter 2). History is not expected to validate a text by providing facts that will prove the text’s truth. Indeed, history cannot do so. Because it has been subjectively rendered, the facts are not, and have never been, known with certainty.

The new historicist critic works in two directions. He or she seeks to understand a text by examining its cultural context—the anxieties, issues, struggles, politics (and more) of the era in which it was created. She also seeks to understand the culture by looking at its literature. Even a work that is not overtly political or ideological affects the culture that reads it and is in turn affected by that culture; the two are intimately bound up with each other, making it impossible to read a text in isolation. In particular, the new historicist critic is interested in understanding a culture’s power structure. She may even try to explain one incident in a text in terms of the concerns of the period in which it was written. When dealing with a contemporary work, however, the critic may not be content with simply understanding the power structure. Instead, she may see a text as an instrument of political awareness and a statement of ideology. Critics who work from this perspective often want to change the culture, and the stories they bring to light are deemed to be tools for modifying it. Like the Marxists who preceded them, these critics assume that literature addresses cultural concerns and can affect society’s attitudes and values.

With such revised assumptions, the questions for readers are not “Were the characters based on real people?” or “Do the events recounted in the text recreate experiences from the author’s life?” or “Does the text capture the spirit of the times accurately?” Rather, the question is “How does the text reveal and comment on the disparate discourses of the culture it depicts?” With that new question, history moves from being a literary work, and an era’s various discourses, one of them being literature, become coparticipants in a complex interaction that is the subject of study. Just as the historian contextualizes historical texts in the many discourses of a culture, so the critic interprets literary texts by viewing them as part of the same interchange. A work of literature is no longer read as an autonomous entity.
An analysis that seeks to examine the world of the author and the text often begins with questions such as these:

- What assumptions did people hold about their lives and their culture during the author's lifetime?
- What traditional practices were being challenged?
- Who wielded power at the time the work was produced? Who wielded power during the period the work depicts?
- What shaping experiences in the author's life were unique to him or her?
- How did political and social events impact the writer's attitudes and choices?

Sometimes an author's intent is clearly evident in the work itself, but on other occasions, the critic must resort to finding interviews or book reviews to determine the purposes behind it. Such is almost always the case when one is interested in knowing how a work has been received since publication. These searches involve questions such as the following:

- What are the author's stated political views?
- Has the writer ever spoken publicly for or against some cause?
- Can one character be assumed to be speaking for the author?
- Was the work an immediate success, or was it largely overlooked upon publication?
- Did the work cause controversy when it was published?
- Has the work sustained its readership since it first appeared?

**WRITING A NEW HISTORICIST LITERARY ANALYSIS**

Throughout your analysis, and as you begin to shape it into a written report, you will hold certain assumptions about the text. You will assume that it has been marked by the time and place in which it was produced and that it reflects the time and place in which it is set. You will also assume that the text serves some purpose, even if the author and perhaps the reader are not consciously aware of what that intention is. In addition, you will accept that the reading you are making will be different from those of other readers, leading to multiple interpretations that are affected by changing cultural movements and evolving understandings of the time and place of production.

**Prewriting**

In the case of a new historicist analysis, prewriting may not be an accurate name for what you are likely to do. Because your attention will be on all the cultural forces surrounding (and infusing) the text with meaning, you will need to be well informed on a number of issues that lie outside it. Consequently, instead of prewriting, you may be prereading. To acquire a comprehensive understanding of the cultural environment —to engage in thick description—you will probably need to do some library work, looking for information in the following areas:

- **The author.** Reading a biography can provide insight into the writer's concerns about personal experiences as well as about society in general. Such interests will affect the presentation of the people and times depicted in the text, whether or not the setting is the same as the one in which the author is working.

  - **The cultural moment.** Not only will newspapers and magazines of the era report the issues of the day, but less explicitly they will also indicate the people's tastes. That is, they will provide information about the rules governing what was deemed to be acceptable and desirable at that time. The issues and the tastes of the day are forces, albeit nonliterary ones, that impinge on what the text means. The tastes of the period, which you may find to be the more revealing, can sometimes be found in the public figures of the day, who symbolize the codes of behavior approved by others. Sometimes the tastes lurk in seemingly insignificant details, such as dress, family customs, advertising, or home decoration. All such matters play a part in how a work is received by the reading public. If a work conflicts with what readers believe (or want to believe), it may meet with resistance. If it reinforces beliefs or satisfies curiosity about a topic, it is more likely to meet with favor. Such research becomes especially meaningful when the social codes and forces at work in a culture appear to conflict with each other.

  - **The text.** Listening for all the voices—present and past as well as one's own—enriches and deepens possibilities for meaning. Although one narrative may be dominant, no text includes only a single one. The world that the text presents is an interaction of different, dynamic discourses that shape and are shaped by one another.
Drafting and Revising

The Introduction  One way of opening your new historicist analysis is to present a general sketch of the era in which the text is set. An overall look at the narrative’s time and place can ground the discussion that follows. The guiding word here is general. The body of the essay will present specific information about politics, behaviors, figures, and institutions, so the introduction should do little more than present a panoramic view of the environment. You may want to think of the opening as an aerial photograph that shows the layout of the countryside. In the course of the discussion, you will provide close-up shots of that overview.

If you prefer to be more probing than such an introduction permits, an alternative opening is to move directly into your discussion about what the work contributes to your understanding of human experience in the particular time and place in which it is set. This approach involves making some generalizations about the text’s interpretation of the culture it represents, which your ensuing discussion will go on to support. For example, you may want to comment on whether (and how) the text supports or challenges the dominant discourses of its own era and those of later ones, or you may choose to explain how the text reveals the complexity of the period.

The Body  One way to organize the body of your discussion comes directly from the prereading process described earlier. That is, you can address the three topics suggested by the prereading’s categories of investigation: the world of the author, personal and public; the historical-cultural environment of the text, both the one it depicts and the one in which it was produced; and the internal world of the text itself, the discourses that generate the narrative. In the case of all three, you should be attentive to the power structure that is in place, questioning inequalities and pointing out social forces that build community and those that destroy it.

Information about the author’s life can shed light on the forces and issues that helped create the text. People and events that were significant to the writer and whether they were positive or negative experiences can point directly to intent and purpose. Philosophical and political grounding can explain explicit and implicit social commentary. A writer’s letters, interviews, and journals can provide comments that illuminate intended audiences and effects. To isolate such helpful information, you can ask some of the following questions:

- What were the formative experiences in the writer’s life?
- Who were the significant people in the writer’s life?
- What texts affected the writer’s thinking?
- What religious-spiritual issues were important to the writer?
- What was the writer’s general political stance?
- What social class did the writer’s family occupy?
- As an adult, what social class did the writer aspire to belong to?
- How much social power did the writer’s family have?
- From how many different social classes and types of work did the writer draw friends?
- What social issues were important to the writer?
- What public roles did the writer assume?
- What one-word label would describe the voice of the narrator in this text?

Looking beyond the author to the culture in which he or she lived means examining events and texts that may seem to lie at some distance from the one under scrutiny. You will want to include social actions, relationships, and documents—all situations that involve exchanges of power. You will look for significance not only in major incidents but also in minor details. Helpful information can be found by asking several kinds of questions. The first has to do with historical events of the period:

- What were the major cultural and historical events of the period? What connections do they have with the text?
- What resistance was there to these events, and what was the source of the resistance?
- What were the major controversies of the period? Are they explicitly or obliquely mentioned in the text?
- What or who represented the power bases in the controversy? Which group was dominant? Which ones were not?
- What professions and disciplines held power? The church? The law? Science? Academia?
Who were the major figures of the period?
What characteristics did those figures embody that were deemed to be admirable? Which were deemed to be objectionable?
What was the source of their power and influence?
Who or what opposed (or at least resisted) their power and influence?
Where do you see power operating secretly—that is, not openly or explicitly?
How did those who held power prevent opposition to or subversion of it?

Another avenue of inquiry regarding the work and the world outside of it deals with written texts of the period. It asks questions such as these:

How is the style of this text similar to or different from other literary texts of the era?
How do the purposes of this text repeat, conflict with, or repeat other texts of the day?
How does this text fit (or not fit) into the nonliterary texts of the same period?
How has this text influenced and been influenced by other texts?

A third group of questions dealing with the work of literature and the world beyond it examines the interactions of the two, including the connections between the text and the world it depicts, the one in which it was published, and those of subsequent periods. You can ask questions such as these:

What would have attracted readers to this work at the time it was published? In later periods?
What was the work’s public and critical reception at the time of publication?
What has changed about the way it has been read since publication?
What models of behavior does this work support?
What do the answers to the preceding four questions tell you about the various cultures represented?
How have values changed since the work was published?
How have values changed since the period in which the work is set?
Has the text changed its culture or any other culture? If so, how?

In addition to examining the life and thought of the author and the cultural ambience of the work’s times, you will also need to look intently at the text itself as a response to both of the other two areas of interest. To determine what commentary the text offers regarding the larger world outside itself, you can ask the following questions:

What various discourses do you meet in the text?
Which ones are powerful?
Which represent the experience of people who have traditionally been overlooked, marginalized, or misrepresented?

What conflicts do you discern in the text between the discourse of the powerful and that of the powerless?
How do conflicting discourses in the text influence and shape each other by agreeing, complementing, or contradicting each other?
How does this text support a particular discourse? What ideology does that support suggest?
What are the social rules observed in the text?
Is the text critical of those rules, or does it treat them as models of behavior?
How does the text support or challenge the values, beliefs, and/or practices of the culture it depicts?
What does the ideological stance imply about the culture it depicts, that of the author’s times, and that of subsequent periods?
How does this text suggest that history does not necessarily proceed in an orderly, positive direction?

The Conclusion If you have followed the suggestions offered here for drafting your essay, you may not have yet mentioned your own stance regarding the text. If that is the case, the conclusion provides an opportunity for you to make a disclaimer as to the certainty of your analysis. Because all readers are inevitably influenced by the times in which they live, nobody approaches a text from a completely unbiased perspective. In an effort to give as true an account of a text as is possible, the responsible new historicist critic will state his or her attitudes and the cultural principles that have led to the analysis. Such a self-positioning will not alter the slant of the critical comments, but it will give the reader a better chance of understanding their source and significance.
Man’s Humanity to Man

Robert Burns claimed in 1784 in his poem “Man Was Made to Mourn: A Dirge” that “Man’s inhumanity to man / Makes countless thousands mourn” (lines 55-6), ironically characterizing cruelty as an inhuman and primitive trait despite the human tendency to be cruel, which his poem so clearly acknowledged and illustrated. Shirley Jackson, author of the short story “The Lottery,” would disagree with the assumption that cruelty is inhuman. She had no such illusions or expectations of humanity’s essential benevolence. The story reveals her implicit cynicism, but the addition of the story’s context, which taking a New Historicism approach uncovers, allows us to understand even more fully that “The Lottery” paints a picture of humanity as inherently, naturally cruel and condemns humanity as ultimately irredeemably savage.

Because of its implied condemnation of the reader, the story evoked even greater shock, horror, and even outrage in its contemporary American readers than it does in its current readers. In 1948 when the story was published, the world had already been shocked by the horrors of the Holocaust and the battlefields of World War II. However, in the almost three years between the end of the war and the story’s publication, the United States had been working hard to return to normalcy, to its prewar idyllic state. Besides, as Thomas Du Bose explains, Americans considered themselves the good guys, having fought and won against the Nazis and, “[h]aving
recently vanquished a cruel and inhumane enemy, perhaps . . . were not ready for a story that implied that they themselves could be cruel and inhumane. Jackson hints that these characteristics are woven into the fabric of the United States by giving her characters names that were prominent in the nation’s early years (for example, Adams and Hutchinson)” (par. 13). In addition to the familiar American family names—Martin, Jones, Adams, Summers, Hutchinson—that appear in the story are those that have had their pronunciation Americanized—Dellacroy for the French Delacroix—and especially the American nicknames of the children—Bobby, Harry, Davy—and adults—Joe, Steve, Tessie—alike. It is clear the reader is meant to recognize these characters and even to identify with them. But in recognizing them as Americans and as like themselves, readers also had to accept the story’s premise that the brutality described in it could happen here in contrast to the commonly and deeply held ideology of the time that “such atrocities could happen in Nazi Germany but not in the United States” (Yarmove 242; par.9). For Ruth Franklin, then, “it is no wonder that the story’s first readers reacted so vehemently to this ugly glimpse of their own faces in the mirror” (par.11). The image they saw in that mirror stated plainly there was no return to innocence, no unknowing “the capacity of ordinary citizens to do evil” (Franklin, par.11). The modern horrors of the modern world were fully upon them, most horrifying of all the knowledge of their own capacity to commit them.

Shirley Jackson’s cynicism, reflected in the story’s unapologetic portrait of humanity as irrevocably savage, is deeply disturbing, and it’s understandable why audiences then and now have been both transfixed and outraged by her story. The horror it confronts us with may be a fiction, but that doesn’t negate its truth, especially the potential to recognize ourselves in the villagers. Haven’t we individually and collectively faced situations when we have been silent in
the face of injustice, when we have clung to traditions that allowed the perpetuation of injustice, when we have chosen to protect ourselves and preserve our wellbeing by sacrificing other people and their wellbeing, sometimes without question or hesitation? When it comes down to it, their humanity is ours. If Tessie Hutchinson’s final outcry is an ironic protest against the human tendency to allow and perpetuate brutality, meant for us to hear as Jackson’s appeal to us, there seems to be little expectation that we will, in fact, hear it.
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Understanding Social Construction or Social Constructs

Social Construction or Social Construct is the idea that “[r]ace, class and gender don’t really mean anything. They only have a meaning because society gives them a meaning. Social construction is how society groups people and how it privileges certain groups over others. For example, you are a woman or a man because society tells you that you are, not because you choose to be. . . . Just like it tells you what race you’re classified as and what social class you belong in. It is all just a social process that makes us differentiate between what’s ‘normal’ and what’s not ‘normal’” (Flores).

Another way to understand social constructs, such as race, gender, and class is to recognize that they are “are contingent on social groups and their collective agreement, imposition, and acceptance of such constructions. . . . There is nothing absolute or real about social constructions in the same way as there is something absolute and real about rocks, rivers, mountains, and in general the objects examined by physics. For example, the existence of a mountain is not contingent on collective acceptance, imposition, or agreement. A mountain will exist regardless of people thinking, agreeing or accepting that it does exist. Unlike a mountain, the existence of race [or gender or class] requires that people collectively agree and accept that it does exist. [However, just because social constructs like race, gender, and class don’t] exist in the world in any ontologically objective way, [they] still [are] real in society (as opposed to nature). Race [as well as gender and class] is a social construction that has real consequences and effects. . . . We know that race [or gender or class] is something that is real in society, and that it shapes the way we see ourselves and others” (Lusca).

Similarly, linguists understand that, objectively speaking, one language or dialect is not better than another; however, social linguists recognize that a society may value or privilege one language or dialect over another. In other words, a society may “construct” one language or dialect as better than another, which has real implications for speakers of each dialect and their perception and treatment in society.

Anthropologist Jeremy Trombley explains: “We have to get past the idea that things that are socially constructed are somehow not real. . . . [S]ocial constructs are real – that’s what makes them so powerful. Race, Class, Gender – these are all social constructs, but it is because they are socially constructed that they have tremendous effects on the lives of people who live in a particular society. . . . In fact, the only thing that saying something is socially constructed does is to indicate that it could have been (or could be) constructed differently – that it is historically and politically contingent. . . . Social constructions are powerful, deeply embedded structures, and change takes time and work” (qtd. in Antrosio).
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What is Social Construction?

By Laura Flores

Social construction is something you might not be aware of. You are somewhat living in segregation depending on what gender, race and class you are. Race, class and gender don’t really mean anything. They only have a meaning because society gives them a meaning. Social construction is how society groups people and how it privileges certain groups over others. For example, you are a woman or a man because society tells you that you are, not because you choose to be. Simple as that. Just like it tells you what race you’re classified as and what social class you belong in. It is all just a social process that makes us differentiate between what’s “normal” and what’s not “normal.”

According to the author of “Night To His Day: The Social Construction of Gender,” Judith Lorber, the social construction of gender begins “with the assignment to a sex category on the basis of what the genitalia look like at birth” (55). When a baby is born, the first thing a doctor does is look at the baby’s genitalia in order to determine whether it will be a boy or a girl; this is the beginning of the gender process of social construction. After they are classified as boy or girl, parents become part of this societal process as they start dressing them with colors that identify their gender. The “normal” thing to do in this case would be for baby girls to be dressed in pink and baby boys to be dressed in blue. It is just not normal to dress your baby boy in pink or your baby girl in blue, right? The reason for this is because society has made colors become a symbol to distinguish boys from girls. After this, as children grow up they start learning how they are supposed to act by observing and imitating the people of the same gender as them; girls should act like their mommy and boys should act like their daddy. Each gender is expected to dress and act in a certain way, but these behaviors then lead to stereotypes.

Allan G. Johnson, the author of “Patriarchy,” states some of the very common stereotypes or “qualities” of men: “control, strength, efficiency, competitiveness, toughness, coolness under pressure” (160). These are just some of the many stereotypes of men regarding how they should “normally” act and try to portray themselves. Stereotypes for women have also come into place. Johnson lists some common stereotypes that society gives women as well: “inefficiency, cooperation, mutuality, equality, sharing compassion, caring,...emotional expressiveness” (Johnson 160). Later on in the passage, Johnson states something very interesting: “Power looks sexy on men, not on women” (Johnson 160). The stereotype of “efficiency” for men and “inefficiency” for women gives a double meaning to this quote. Since women are inefficient, in other words unskilled, compared to men, it is evident that society’s opinion on gender describes that men should have the power. This quote is one more thing that is contributing to the social construction of gender by making men seem like they have more power and privilege over women.

Privilege doesn’t just fall into the social construction of gender, but also that of class difference. Sandra K. Hoyt, the author of “Mentoring With Class,” defines social class as an “economic structure” (189). There are three different types of social classes: upper, middle, and lower class. Everyone in this society is categorized within this economic structure based on their financial status. The upper class is known as the “rich,” the middle class as the “norm,” and the lower class as the “poor.” The upper class is usually thought to have higher privileges than the lower class. For example, in terms of education, the students that belong in the upper class have a higher chance to be successful in life because they come from wealthy families that can provide them with a private education system. In contrast, the lower class students have to learn how to deal with what’s provided for them. If the public system is not preparing them well enough just like a private schooling system would, then there’s nothing much to do. Let’s also take into consideration that the social construction of class difference isn’t only necessarily identified by society depending on financial status. Race also helps us get an idea of which social class people belong in.
Racial formation is another term for the social construction of race. The authors of "Racial Formation in the United States," Omi and Winant, define racial formation as "the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed" (55). By saying that racial formation is a "sociohistorical process" they are saying that race was formed and given a meaning by society because of the many critical events that have happened in history over time. They also state that "race is a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies" (Omi and Winant 55). In other words, people are characterized and identified by only their appearance more specifically, skin pigmentation. There are standards, stereotypes and expectations that follow these physical characteristics.

This goes back to my previous example of how not only financial status helps us identify what social class someone is in. Someone might just make assumptions of what race you are just by saying the class you belong to. In one of our previous lectures in class, we were discussing the difference between class and how race plays a role in the hierarchy of social class. Our instructor, Chesa, asked us, "if you had to imagine the upper class, how would you describe it?" We all sat and thought about it for a second, and the first two things that were said out loud were the words "rich" and "white." She asked us once again, but this time it was to think about the middle class and most people described it as the "normal." Normal to us was a white fenced house, a typical family of three and a nice car. Now, when she asked how we see a working (lower) class, people said "people of color" and people living in "apartments." It was surprising to see how everyone was in consensus with all that was being said. We all knew which race usually was associated with each social class as well as the typical stereotypes of class, race and gender. This concludes that we are apparently all participants of this social construction.

This social construction in this society is segregating us depending on our physical appearance and our material possessions. We are seen differently because of where we live, where we come from and how we look. Women are weak, therefore men, who are strong and controlling, should be the ones in power. If you live in an apartment, then you must be from the lower class, but if you live in a house then you must be either middle or upper class. If you go to a private school then you must be rich, but if you go to a public school then most certainly you're poor or low income. This is all what society has inculcated in us, but we also have fault that we have been caught up on this whole idea of stereotypes and standards that we are supposed to follow because after all, we believe what we want to believe.

Sources


Gender Criticism

Preparing to read and write using the lens of Gender Criticism:
Like Cultural and Marxist Criticism, Gender Criticism focuses on the construction of social identity, on gender relations, and especially on access, relationships, and responses to power in this case identity and power related to gender. Gender Criticism examines a text focusing on what is revealed about gender norms and values—including gender expressions, gender roles, communication patterns, interactions, internal and external conflicts, etc.—in the society represented in the text.

At its most basic, Gender Criticism seeks to uncover what it means to be female or male in the society represented in the text and so examines how femininity and masculinity are depicted, which traits and behaviors are associated with femaleness and expected of women and which ones are associated with maleness and expected of men. It also looks at the extent to which characters’ gender roles, gender expressions, speech and communication patterns, and interactions depend on, conform to, or challenge these norms and values.

Of particular concern to Gender Criticism are the attitudes toward, treatment, and interaction of people based on their gender and relative access to power because of that gender. Gender Criticism thus focuses especially on analyzing and interpreting signs in the text of oppression of one group by another (or dominance of one group over another), the basis of the oppression (what allows or gives rise to it), the form(s) or expressions that oppression takes, its effects on or implications for both the oppressors and the oppressed, and also the response(s) to oppression: acceptance (through silence or inaction) or resistance (subtle or overt, passive or active), etc.

The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms points out:
Gender critics draw a distinction between gender, the identities and characteristics commonly associated with men, women, masculinity, and femininity, and sex, the biological designation of male or female. They typically reject the essentialist view that gender is natural or innate and instead take the constructionist position that gender is a social artifact, a learned behavior, a product of language and culture.

Some gender critics have extended the term gender to reference sexuality as well, questioning the distinction between heterosexuality and homosexuality and arguing that these terms are social constructs, too. These critics, including queer theorists, view sexuality not as a fixed set of binary oppositions limited to hetero- and homosexuality but as a continuum encompassing behaviors and responses ranging from bestiality to bondage. Other gender critics, especially many gay and lesbian critics, take an essentialist position, arguing that sexuality is innate rather than culturally produced. . .

[G]ender critics have analyzed masculinity as a complex construct that produces and reproduces a host of behaviors and goals such as performance and conquest, many of them destructive and most of them harmful to women.

Some extreme constructionists . . . have further complicated the sex-gender debate by arguing that even nature is in some sense a cultural construct. . . . [G]ender theorist Judith Butler argued that sexual difference, like gender, is culturally produced rather than natural, with notions about sex created as a byproduct of the cultural construction of gender. As a result, no one can really know how the body functions apart from the culture in which it lives. (Murfin and Ray 197, 198, 199)
Ultimately, Gender Criticism seeks to uncover the text’s attitude toward or argument about gender norms, conformity or nonconformity to them, the existence/perpetuation of oppression, etc., whether the text is upholding, promoting, questioning, challenging, or rejecting, etc., the norms or status quo, etc. Often the attitude or argument of the text is apparent in the subtle or not so subtle depiction of (and commentary on) the characters in terms of their gender and conformity or nonconformity to gender norms. With whom are we supposed to sympathize?

As with the other literary criticisms, you need to use Gender Criticism to focus your close reading/analysis of the text, and you need to prove your Gender Criticism argument with that close reading/analysis.

Also, while research is not excluded from Gender Criticism, the way it is from New Criticism and Deconstruction, it is not mandatory as it is in New Historicism. However, as with New Historicism, if you elect to do research, you are, nevertheless, expected to focus your argument on close reading/analysis of the text, using the research to support or deepen your argument and interpretation (not simply alongside or in place of your argument/interpretation). In addition, if you elect to do research, you are obligated to avoid plagiarism by following the conventions of MLA Style research when quoting, paraphrasing, and summarizing primary and secondary sources and to select and evaluate secondary sources according to their validity and appropriateness so that they strengthen rather than weaken your argument and credibility.

**Final note:**
A successful argument based on Gender Criticism requires one to identify, prove, and explain the impact or implications of conforming to or deviating from specific gender roles or the outcome, implications, or effect of the oppression of one gender by another (or dominance of one gender over another), etc., in essence to point out the text’s argument—its meaning and/or purpose—about gender. As with any good claim, the claim of your Gender Criticism response paper or essay should focus on a single specific, unified argument. Note: A successful argument will focus narrowly on one overall way men or women express or respond to their gender roles or one group’s expression of or response to power/oppression.

Read over the following pages to gain a better understanding of Gender Criticism and how to apply it to your literary analysis:

**Key Terms/Concepts:**

**Sex** is a biological determination and refers to whether a person is biologically a man or woman, male or female. The terms male and female or maleness and femaleness are associated with sex.

**Gender** is socially constructed and refers to “the attitudes, feelings, and behaviors that a given culture associates with a person’s biological sex. Behavior that is compatible with cultural expectations is referred to as gender-normative; behaviors that are viewed as incompatible with these expectations constitute gender non-conformity” (APA).

**Feminine** and **masculine** or **femininity** and **masculinity** are terms associated with gender.

**Gender Identity:** An individual’s sense of his or her own gender as male or female, masculine or feminine.
Gender Expression refers to the “way in which a person acts to communicate gender within a given culture; for example, in terms of clothing, communication patterns, and interests. A person’s gender expression may or may not be consistent with socially prescribed gender roles, and may or may not reflect his or her gender identity” (APA).

Gender Roles: society’s idea of how boys and girls or men and women are expected to behave and should be treated, behaviors that can be considered “scripted” by society. Gender has everything to do with the society, in which one lives (Milton Diamond). Socially constructed ideas of gender roles, like ideologies in general, “are difficult to change because they are generally accepted, without question, to be naturally the way they are and should be” (Dobie).

Excerpted and edited from Ann Dobie’s “Glossary of Terms Used in Literary Criticism” in Theory into Practice: An Introduction to Literary Criticism (except where noted):

Androcentric: Attitudes, practices, or social organizations that are based on the assumption that men are the model of being.

Heterosexual privilege: The assumption that heterosexuality is the standard by which sexual practice is measured.

Homophobia: Fear, dislike, and/or disapproval of homosexuals and homosexuality. It is observable in demeaning images, casual comments, jokes, and other forms of expression.

Misogyny: Hatred[, dislike, or mistrust] of [or ingrained prejudice against] women.

Subaltern: A person of inferior status. The subordinate position of subalterns may be based on gender, class, race, ethnicity or culture. Subaltern writers seek to make their marginalized cultures which are largely unrecognized by history known and valued for their past and present.

Symbolic Order: Feminist critics are concerned with this phase of development in which women are socialized into accepting the language and Law of the Father [because it is the father who enforces cultural norms and laws] and are thereby made inferior.

Questions to Ask Yourself When Preparing to Write a Gender Criticism Paper:

Do characters speak with typically female mannerisms, such as unfinished sentences or silences (suggesting hesitation or a non-confrontation or appeasement) or exclamations or weeping or expressions of sympathy/empathy (suggesting emotionality)?

Do characters speak with typically male mannerisms, such as imperative, declarative sentences, interruptions or speaking over others, etc.?

Do characters conform to expected norms? Are women nurturing, giving, passive, emotional, obedient/submissive? Are men aggressive, outspoken, confident, demanding, unemotional/impassive?

Do some characters defy expected gender norms, women taking on masculine characteristics or men taking on feminine characteristics?

How do characters perceive and judge themselves and others based on their conformity to or defiance of gender norms? How do they respond to or treat others based on the others’ conformity to or defiance of gender norms?
What stereotypes of women do you find?

What stereotypes of men do you find?

Does the work seem to promote or uphold stereotypical gender roles or norms, expressions, and the social status quo in terms of power relations? Does it challenge or question or resist or defy them? How?

Who holds the power? How do they demonstrate or use that power? How aware are they of the power they hold? How entitled to or desirous and protective of power are they?

Who is powerless? How do they demonstrate their lack of power and/or their awareness of their powerlessness? How do they acknowledge and/or respond to those with power?

According to this text, what does it mean to be female? What does it mean to be male?

What divisions of labor exist between men and women?

Who holds positions of authority and influence?

Who controls the finances?

What kinds of accomplishments do the women characters achieved and are they acknowledged and respected for these accomplishments?

Do the male characters consult the female characters before taking action or merely inform the women of their past or intended actions?

Who is primarily responsible for making decisions?

Do the women play an overt role in decision-making or do they work surreptitiously (unnoticed) in the background?

Are the roles or jobs women play minor, supportive?

How do the male characters talk about the female characters? How do the male characters talk to the female characters? How do the male characters act toward the female characters?

How do the female characters talk about the male characters? How do the female characters talk to the male characters? How do the female characters act toward the male characters?

Is heterosexuality viewed as the norm?
Man’s Humanity to Man

Robert Burns claimed in 1784 in his poem “Man Was Made to Mourn: A Dirge” that “Man’s inhumanity to man / Makes countless thousands mourn” (lines 55-6), ironically characterizing cruelty as an inhuman and primitive trait despite the human tendency to be cruel, which his poem so clearly acknowledged and illustrated. Shirley Jackson, author of the short story “The Lottery,” would disagree with the assumption that cruelty is inhuman. She had no such illusions or expectations of humanity’s essential benevolence. Viewed through the lens of Gender Criticism, the story reveals characters who cling to traditions, including traditional gender roles, as a matter of course and regardless or because of their results. “The Lottery” thus paints a picture of humanity as inherently, naturally cruel and condemns humanity as ultimately irredeemably savage.

The story depicts the traditional gender norms, implicating them in the perpetuation of injustice. The traditional gender dichotomies are made apparent first in the children. The boys are described as active, aggressive, and independent, several of them together “mak[ing] a great pile of stones . . . and guard[ing] it against the raids of the other boys” (Jackson 964). They are focused entirely on their own activity, using it to establish their dominance among themselves, apparently oblivious to the girls’ presence. The girls, in contrast, are shown to be passive, withdrawn, and dependent, “[standing] aside, talking among themselves, looking over their
shoulders at the boys” (964). They wait, relegated to the sidelines, merely talking, constantly aware of the boys, who seem to dominate the girls’ attention. These same dichotomies carry over into the depiction of the adults. The men stand at a distance, “surveying their own children, speaking of planting and rain, tractors and taxes” (964) as if to assert their authority, objectivity, and importance. The word “surveying,” in particular, suggests an attitude of physical and emotional distance as well as dominance or ownership. The women, in contrast, are made to seem inconsequential: “The women, wearing faded house dresses and sweaters, came shortly after their menfolk. They greeted one another and exchanged bits of gossip as they went to join their husbands” (964). The women are made to seem like appendages to their husbands, coming after them, suggesting both subordination as well as subjugation as if they are obeying an implicit command. Similarly, the women’s talk is described simply as “gossip,” unlike the weightier matters of livelihood the men discuss. The power differential is clearly recognized by the children, most noticeably by the boys, who, when called by their mothers, “came reluctantly, having to be called four or five times” (964) but were immediately obedient to their fathers as exemplified by Bobby Martin who “ducked under his mother’s grasping hand and ran, laughing, back to the pile of stones, but when his father spoke up sharply . . . came quickly and took his place between his father and his oldest brother” (964). Clearly, the behaviors and attitudes are learned. It is no wonder, then, that just as the boys do not heed the girls or the women, neither do the men. The men are responsible for all of the decision making and activity. The women wait on the men and wait to be told what to do. The men, who are shown to be responsible for the governance of the society, are thus shown also to be primarily responsible for the perpetuation of its traditions. If the women did protest, it seems unlikely that their protest would be heard by the men. So we might, in fact, understand Mrs. Adams’ response to Old Man
Warner that “[s]ome places have already quit lotteries” (967) as “the most significant challenge to the lottery . . . [and] an oblique but nevertheless real gesture of resistance” (Oehlenschläger, par.2) and along with it Tessie Hutchinson’s repeated outcries, “It wasn’t fair! . . . It isn’t fair, it isn’t right” (Jackson 967, 969), as protests against the larger injustice not just her own victimization. However, their protests are quickly and effectively dismissed or silenced: Mrs. Adams’ by Old Man Warner’s subsequent outburst and Tessie Hutchinson’s first by her husband and then at the end by the community acting as a mob. It’s thus made horrifyingly clear that protests against injustice and brutality, even those from within the community, are bound to be ineffectual.

Shirley Jackson’s cynicism, reflected in the story’s unapologetic portrait of humanity as irrevocably savage, is deeply disturbing, and it’s understandable why audiences then and now have been both transfixed and outraged by her story. The horror it confronts us with may be a fiction, but that doesn’t negate its truth, especially the potential to recognize ourselves in the villagers. Haven’t we individually and collectively faced situations when we have been silent in the face of injustice, when we have clung to traditions that allowed the perpetuation of injustice, when we have chosen to protect ourselves and preserve our wellbeing by sacrificing other people and their wellbeing, sometimes without question or hesitation? When it comes down to it, their humanity is ours. If Tessie Hutchinson’s final outcry is an ironic protest against the human tendency to allow and perpetuate brutality, meant for us to hear as Jackson’s appeal to us, there seems to be little expectation that we will, in fact, hear it.
Works Cited


Marxist Criticism

Preparing to read and write using the lens of Marxist Criticism:
Marxist Criticism examines the importance and impact of the economic or class system on the society represented in the text, particularly its characters. In particular, it focuses on the oppression of the society/characters by the ideologies about class and (economic) success that are used to maintain the status quo, not just keeping the power in the hands of the “haves” and out of the hands of the “have-nots” but also keeping the system of “haves” and “have-nots” in place. Thus the central focus of Marxist Criticism is often the power inherent in the class system, what confers or symbolizes it, who has it, who wants it, how it’s demonstrated, wielded, sought after, struggled over as well as its effects on human nature or psychology and interactions, etc.

Marxist Criticism has often (though not always) placed emphasis on the oppressed or have-nots as historically this perspective has been underrepresented or ignored entirely. Marxist Criticism historically has sought to “correct” and challenge the status quo, which it sees as too often perpetuated by ignorance or silence.

It can be difficult to notice class in literature as it is rarely announced, often identified subtly or obliquely in descriptions of setting or characters, in dialogue (characters’ speech patterns, dialect, idiomatic expressions), in characters’ desires, actions, and motivations. Uncovering these signs of class and class conflict thus requires close reading/explication and the tools and practices of New Criticism. The list of key terms and questions on the following pages can give you an idea of what to focus on while reading texts and thinking about writing a response paper or essay using the lens of Marxist Criticism.

While Marxist Criticism had its origins in the theories of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels and the social revolution they inspired, the focus of current Marxist (Literary) Criticism and our purpose in this course is not to use literature to question and overturn current class systems or to see literature as a tool for or against such a social revolution. Instead, our purpose is to focus on and analyze the texts themselves in order to reveal their depiction of and commentary on the class systems represented within them. Thus the author’s class or beliefs about class are only tangentially relevant. This information might help support an argument claiming that the text’s purpose is to condemn a certain class system, for example, but is not enough in and of itself without textual evidence to prove such an argument.

While research is not excluded from Marxist Criticism, the way it is from New Criticism and Deconstruction, it is not mandatory as it is in New Historicism. However, as with New Historicism, if you elect to do research, you are, nevertheless, expected to focus your argument on close reading/analysis of the text, using the research to support or deepen your argument and interpretation (not simply alongside or in place of your argument/interpretation). In addition, if you elect to do research, you are obligated to avoid plagiarism by following the conventions of MLA Style research when quoting, paraphrasing, and summarizing primary and secondary sources and to select and evaluate secondary sources according to their validity and appropriateness so that they strengthen rather than weaken your argument and credibility.
Final note:
A successful argument based on Marxist Criticism requires more than identifying the class characters belong to or even the class conflict. It requires one to identify, prove, and explain the impact or implications of belonging to a particular class or the outcome of class conflict and the implications of this outcome, etc., in essence to point out the text’s argument—it’s meaning and/or purpose—about the class system reflected in it. As with any good claim, the claim of your Marxist Criticism response paper or essay should focus on a single specific, unified argument. Note: Meaning refers to what the text reveals about the class system; purpose refers to what the text is doing, whether it’s upholding, reflecting, questioning, challenging, condemning, etc., the meaning (class system) it reveals.

Read over the following pages to gain a better understanding of the terms and concepts associated with Marxist Criticism and how to apply it to your literary analysis:

Excerpted and edited from Ann Dobie’s “Glossary of Terms Used in Literary Criticism” in Theory into Practice: An Introduction to Literary Criticism (except where noted):

Key Terms/Concepts:

Base: The methods of production in a given society.

Bourgeoisie: The name given by Marx to [the social class that owns property and controls the means of producing wealth] in a society. It is a term taken from French, used to refer to members of the middle class, that is, the shopkeepers and merchants.

Class Consciousness: Awareness of one’s self as belong[ing] to a class that is, itself, a part of a class system which privileges members of upper classes and imposes burdens upon members of lower classes. In Marxist ideology, until class consciousness has been achieved, individuals are doomed to wander in the “false consciousness” induced by various ideological processes which keep them unaware of their true condition. (Arnie Sanders)

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. The amount of human labor contained in it is the basis for establishing the value of a commodity.
**False Consciousness:** A state [in which one] accepts ["without protest or questioning" (Dobie)] the "naturalness" of ["an unfavorable social system" (Dobie) or] ideologies that really are the products of material historical circumstances and that disguise their control over one's thought by pretending to [be] the "natural order of things." Such ideologies draw one's attention away from the socio-economic facts governing one's condition and toward the pursuit of notions like "the American Dream" of self-improvement achieved solely by individualistic effort, pursuit of temporary satisfaction of falsely constructed needs by means of Consumerism, or belief in false ideological systems like "Patriotism," "Classism," and "Religion." While one pursues the mythic satisfactions of the "Dream," placates one's true desires with purchases [which] advertising conditions one to desire, or chants the slogans of Patriotism, Classism, or Religion, the people who really run the culture, like politicians, business owners, aristocrats, and religious leaders, grow richer and more powerful. (Arnie Sanders)

**Hegemony:** Dominance of one state or group over another.

**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. [Note: One can apply this to literature by examining the society represented in the text and looking for the ideological atmosphere generated by its material circumstances.]

**Ideology:** A belief system. It is a set of values and ways of thinking through which people see the world they live in, of which they are often unaware, and which they accept without questioning as truth.

**Interpellation:** A term used by Louis Althusser to refer to the process by which the working class is manipulated to accept the ideology of the dominant one.

**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. [Note: One can apply this to literature by examining the society represented in the text and looking for the economic conditions underlying it.]

**Proletariat:** The name given by Marx to the workers in a society. Its members have nothing but their labor to sell to survive. [They have no control over the means of production. The proletariat is traditionally controlled by the bourgeoisie, and it is the labor of the proletariat that produces the wealth (power/control) of the bourgeoisie.]

**Reflectionism:** A theory that the superstructure of a society mirrors its economic base and, by extension, that a text reflects the society that produced it.

**Revolutionary Consciousness:** In Marxist thinking, the stage of awareness which follows class consciousness and is stimulated by perception of the cultural forces that construct class relations, and their vulnerability to consciously directed overthrow to bring about social change. Early Marxists tended to believe that historical forces alone, inevitably and without the need for intervention, eventually would bring about the social changes Marxist theory predicted (e.g., the overthrow of the bourgeoisie by the proletariat). Later thinkers held that this process could be stimulated and sped up by the education of workers to bring them first to class consciousness, and then to revolutionary consciousness. (Arnie Sanders)

**Sign Value:** An assessment of something based on how impressive it makes a person look.
**Subaltern**: A person of inferior status. The subordinate position of subalterns may be based on gender, class, race, ethnicity or culture. Subaltern writers seek to make their marginalized cultures which are largely unrecognized by history known and valued for their past and present.

**Superstructure**: The social, political, and ideological systems and institutions – for example, the values, art, and legal processes of a society – that are generated by the base.

**Use Value**: An appraisal of something based on what it can do.

**Weltanschauung**: The worldview of the author. A German word that refers to an individual’s philosophy, how he or she views civilization and his or her relationship to it.
READING FROM A MARXIST PERSPECTIVE

To understand the discussion that follows, you will need to read the short story "The Diamond Necklace," by Guy de Maupassant, which begins on page 338.

Many of the principles of Marxism, and the approach to literary criticism that it spawned, have already been mentioned in the brief historical survey you just read. Now it will be helpful to examine them in more detail and to see how they can be applied to literary texts.

Economic Power

According to Marx, the moving force behind human history is its economic systems, for people’s lives are determined by their economic circumstances. A society, he says, is shaped by its "forces of production," the methods it uses to produce the material elements of life. The economic conditions underlying the society are called material circumstances, and the ideological atmosphere they generate is known as the historical situation. This means that to explain any social or political context, any event or product, it is first necessary to understand the material and historical circumstances in which it occurs.

In Guy de Maupassant’s short story “The Diamond Necklace,” we are given a clear picture of a society that has unequally distributed its goods or even the means to achieve them. Madame Loisel has no commodity or skills to sell, only her youth and beauty to be used to attract a husband. Without access to those circles where she can find a man with wealth and charm, she is doomed to stay in a powerless situation with no way to approach the elegant lifestyle she desires. The material circumstances of her society have relegated her to a dreary existence from which she can find no exit. Her husband is so conditioned to accept the situation that he does not understand her hunger to be part of a more glamorous and elegant world. He is content with people for his supper because he has been socially constructed to want nothing more.

If a society is shaped by its "forces of production," the way in which society provides food, clothing, shelter, and other such necessities creates among groups of people social relations that become the culture’s foundation. In short, the means of production structure the society. Capitalism, for example, has a two-part structure consisting of the bourgeoisie, who own property and thereby control the means of production, and the proletariat, the workers controlled by the bourgeoisie and whose labor produces their wealth. (Although in American society today, we have come to use the term bourgeoisie to mean "middle class," it originally designated the owners and the self-employed as opposed to wage earners.) Because those who control production have a power base, they have many ways to ensure that they will maintain their position. They can manipulate politics, government, education, the arts and entertainment, news media—all aspects of the culture—to that end.

The division of the bourgeoisie and proletariat in the society depicted in "The Diamond Necklace" is firmly established and maintained. Mme. Loisel’s husband is a “petty clerk,” and although she has a wealthy friend from her convent days, she has none of the accoutrements that would fit her to attend a reception to which her husband has (with some manipulation) managed to be invited. In this story the haves are separated from the have-nots by what they own and what they lack and by their ample or limited opportunity to acquire wealth and power. The division grows more apparent and unbridgeable as the couple works at increasingly demeaning jobs to acquire the money to pay off their loans. Because of the debts owed to the bourgeoisie, incurred because of the loss of the necklace owned by Mme. Loisel’s well-to-do friend, they sink lower and lower on the social scale, losing what little hold they once had on social position or physical comfort. In the end, Mme. Loisel has become old and unkeeps, unrecognizable to her friend. And in the most unjust irony of all, she learns after ten years that her efforts have been in vain. The bourgeoisie has tricked her once again by lending her a necklace not of diamonds but of cut glass.

Marx saw history as progressive and inevitable. Private ownership, he said, began with slavery, then evolved into feudalism, which was largely replaced by capitalism by the late eighteenth century. Evident in small ways as early as the sixteenth century, capitalism became a fully developed system with the growing power of the bourgeoisie in the mid-nineteenth century. At every stage, it had negative consequences because it was a flawed system that involved maintaining the power of a few by the repression of many. The result was ongoing class struggle, such as the one depicted in the "The Diamond Necklace" between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The Marxist, then, works to reveal the internal contradictions of capitalism so that the proletariat will recognize its subjugation and rise up to seize what is rightfully theirs. As Marx stated in a famous passage from The Communist Manifesto, "Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communist revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. Working men of all countries, unite!" Although Mme. Loisel makes no move to create a revolution, she is keenly aware of the source of her sufferings. As she tells her affluent friend, “I have had some hard days since I saw you; and some miserable ones—and all because of you.” The fall of the bourgeoisie and the victory of the proletariat Marx deemed to be “equally inevitable,” and the new system born of such a revolution would be a classless society in which everyone has equal access to its goods and services, such as food, education, and medical care.

Some of the damage caused by the economics of capitalism, according to Marxists, is psychological. In its need to sell more goods, capitalism preys on the insecurities of consumers, who are urged to compete with others in the number and quality of their possessions: a newer car, a bigger diamond engagement ring, a second house. The result is commodification, an attitude of valuing things not for their utility (use value) but for their power to impress others (sign value) or for their resale possibilities (exchange value). Both Mme. Loisel and her wealthy friend are victims of their society’s emphasis on sign value. The former is so dazzled by the glitter of jewels and gowns and fashionable people that she can find little happiness in the humble attentions of her husband-clerk, and her friend’s interest in the necklace apparently extends no further than the fact...
that it is impressive evidence of her wealth, for she substitutes glass for the real thing. When the acquisition of things that possess sign value and/or exchange value becomes extreme, an individual can be said to be practicing conspicuous consumption.

Because the economic system shapes the society, the methods of production are known as the base. The social, political, and ideological systems and the institutions that they generate—the values, art, legal processes—are known as the superstructure.

Because the dominant class controls the superstructure, it is, by extension, able to control the members of the working classes. Marxists are not in complete agreement as to whether the superstructure simply reflects the base or whether it can also affect the base. The group known as reflectionists (who subscribe to the vulgar Marxism mentioned earlier) sees the superstructure as being formed by the base, making literature (and other such products) a mirror of society’s consciousness. In a capitalist society, for example, the superstructure would exhibit the alienation and fragmentation that, according to the Marxists, the economic system produces. Controlled by the bourgeoisie, texts may, at least superficially, glamorize the status quo in order to maintain a stable division of power and means. Readers may not be aware of manipulation, especially when it appears in the form of entertainment, but it is less effective for its subtle presentation.

Other Marxists, who assume that the superstructure is capable of shaping the base, recognize that literature (as well as art, entertainment, and such) can be a means for the working class to change the system. By promoting their own culture, they can create a new superstructure and eventually a different base. Even Marx and Engels admitted that some aspects of the superstructure, such as philosophy and art, are “relatively autonomous,” making it possible to use them to alter ideologies.

The economic base in “The Diamond Necklace” is significant to all that is depicted in the story. Mme. Loisel’s husband is a clerk whose employees have power over his professional life and over their social relationships with him. He and his employer lead very different kinds of lives. The bourgeoisie give elegant parties, while the clerk and his wife eat potpie. The “petty clerk” is not expected to fraternize with his betters except by the rare invitation (so eagerly sought after by him) that comes his way. And on such occasions, it is with difficulty that Mme. Loisel can achieve the appropriate appearance—dress, jewels, wrap. As they take on less attractive jobs to pay back what is owed, they are even less acceptable in the corridors of wealth and power. In the end, as noted, Mme. Loisel’s friend does not even recognize her.

To examine the economic forces in a narrative, you can begin by asking questions such as these:

- Who are the powerful people in the society depicted in the text?
- Who are the powerless people?
- Are the two groups depicted with equal attention?
- Which groups are you encouraged to admire?

### Materialism versus Spirituality

Marx maintained that reality is material, not spiritual. Our culture, he said, is not based on some divine essence or the Platonic forms or on contemplation of timeless abstractions. It is not our philosophical or religious beliefs that make us who we are, for we are not spiritual beings but socially constructed ones. We are not products of divine design but creations of our own cultural and social circumstances.

To understand ourselves, we must look to the concrete, observable world we live in day by day. The material world will show us reality. It will show us, for example, that people live in social groups, making all of our actions interrelated. By examining the relationships among socioeconomic classes and by analyzing the superstructure, we can achieve insight into ourselves and our society. For example, the critic who looks at instances of class conflict or at the institutions, entertainment, news media, legal, and other systems of a society discovers how the distribution of economic power undergirds the society. Such analyses uncover the base (the economic system) and the social classes it has produced. Because the base and the superstructure are under the control of the dominant class, the people’s worldview is likely to be false; the critic’s obligation is to expose the oppression and consequent alienation that have been covered over. The Marxists rarely content simply to expose the failings of capitalism and often goes on to argue for the fair redistribution of goods by the government.

It is the material world that has created Mme. Loisel, for example, and it is the material world that destroys her. Her desire for expensive objects and the circles in which they are found, generated by the capitalistic system she lives in rather than by any character flaw, leads her to make a foolish request of a friend. When she loses the “diamond” necklace, she, too, is lost. Her relationship with her friend, as well as any hope for a return to the glittering world of the reception, is shattered. She is destroyed not by spiritual failure but by an economic system that has created a superstructure that will not allow her to have a better life. She is trapped by material circumstances, and the final revelation about the false jewels will only deepen her sense of alienation and powerlessness, according to a Marxist perspective.

Such insights come from asking questions such as the following:

- What does the setting tell you about the distribution of power and wealth?
- Is there evidence of conspicuous consumption?
- Does the society that is depicted value things for their usefulness, for their potential for resale or trade, or for their power to convey social status?
Do you find in the text itself evidence that the work is a product of the culture in which it originated?

Where do you see characters making decisions based not on abstract principles, but on the economic system in which they live?

**Class Conflict**

One of the basic assumptions of Marxism is that the “forces of production,” the way goods and services are produced, will, in a capitalist society, inevitably generate conflict between social classes created by the way economic resources are used and who profits from them. More specifically, the struggle will take place between the bourgeoisie, who control the means of production by owning the natural and human resources, and the proletariat, who supply the labor that allows the owners to make a profit. The conflict is sometimes realized as a clash of management and labor, sometimes simply as friction between socioeconomic classes. They are two parts of a whole that struggle against each other, not just physically but also ideologically. Marx referred to this confrontation as dialectical materialism. Actually the term includes more than class conflict, for it refers to the view that all change is the product of the struggle between opposites generated by contradictions inherent in all events, ideas, and movements. A thesis collides with its antithesis, finally reaching synthesis, which generates its own antithesis, and so on, thereby producing change.

The Marxist is aware that the working class does not always recognize the system in which it has been caught. The dominant class, using its power to make the prevailing system seem to be the logical, natural one, entraps the proletariat into holding the sense of identity and worth that the bourgeoisie wants them to hold, one that will allow the powerful to remain in control. Madame Loisel, for instance, is content with her lot. He aspires to be nothing more than what he is and has difficulty understanding his wife’s dreams. As for Mme. Loisel, she longs for things that “most other women in her situation would not have noticed.” She believes herself born for luxuries—that is, born as a misplaced member of the middle class. They both experience the consequent disillusionment and alienation described by Marx. Before the loss of the necklace, M. Loisel is given little credit for what he does. As a “petty clerk,” he has little personal connection to his labor and is given no credit for what he produces. After the loss of the necklace, the situation is intensified, for the couple is finally shut out of all social contact with bourgeois society. In the end, Mme. Loisel moves to carry out what Marx calls upon the proletariat to do. She realizes that her life has been controlled by others. Freed of the debt she has owed her wealthy friend, she determines to free herself of the social enslavement to her friend by speaking openly and honestly at last. In doing so, she becomes painfully aware of the unsuspected depth of the control the latter has had over her. The necklace is false. She has been stripped of her dreams and forced to suffer for nothing. Finally, by speaking clearly, she engages in revolution by refusing to want any longer what the bourgeoisie values.

You can find evidence of class conflict and its repercussions by asking some of the following questions about the text you are analyzing:

- How many different social classes do the characters represent?
- Where do they struggle with each other?
- Do you find repression and manipulation of workers by owners?
- Is there evidence of alienation and fragmentation?
- Does the bourgeoisie in the text, either consciously or unconsciously, routinely repress and manipulate less powerful groups? If so, what are the tools they use? News media? Religion? Literature? Art?
- Do the working-class characters realize their lack of power?
- Does the work of literature advocate reform or revolution, either overtly or obliquely?

**Art, Literature, and Ideologies**

Ideology is a term that turns up frequently in Marxist discussions. It refers to a belief system produced, according to Marxists, by the relations between the different classes in a society, classes that have come about because of the society’s modes of production. An ideology can be positive, leading to a better world for the people, or it can be negative, serving the interests of a repressive system. The latter rarely presents itself as an ideology, however. Instead, it appears to be a reasonable, natural worldview because it is in the self-interest of those in power to convince people that it is so. Even a flawed system must appear to be a success. An ideology dictated by the dominant class functions to secure its power. When such cultural conditioning leads the people to accept a system that is unfavorable for them without protest or questioning—that is, to accept it as the logical way for things to be—they have developed a false consciousness. Marxism works to rid society of such deceits by exposing the ideological failings that have been concealed. It takes responsibility for making people aware of how they have unconsciously accepted the subservient, powerless roles in their society that have been prescribed for them by others.

Marx himself was a well-educated, widely read German intellectual who could discourse on the poetry, fiction, and drama of more than a single culture. He enjoyed the theater and frequently made references to literature of all kinds. He was aware, however, that art and literature are an attractive and effective means of convincing the proletariat that their oppression is just and right. Literature is a particularly powerful tool for maintaining the social status quo because it operates under the guise of being entertainment, making it possible to influence an audience even when its members are unaware of being swayed. Because it does not seem to be didactic, it can lead people to accept an unfavorable socioeconomic system and to affirm their place in that system as the proper one. By doing so, it serves the economic interests of those who are in power. Marx points out that controlling what is produced is not difficult because those who create art must flatter (or not offend) their clients who pay for it—the bourgeoisie.
Although Marxist views about literature coexist comfortably with the principles of some other schools of criticism, they stand in direct opposition to the concerns of the formalists. Marxist critics see a literary work not as an aesthetic object to be experienced for its own intrinsic worth but as a product of the socioeconomic aspects of a particular culture. In general, Marxists accept that critics must do more than explain how a work conforms to certain literary conventions or examine its aesthetic qualities. Marxist critics must be concerned with identifying the ideology of a work and pointing out its worth or its deficiencies. The good Marxist critic is careful to avoid the kind of approach that concerns itself with form and craft at the expense of examining social realities. Instead, the Marxist critic will search out the depiction of inequities in social classes, an imbalance of goods and power among people, or manipulation of the worker by the bourgeoisie and will then point out the injustice of that society. If a text presents a society in which class conflict has been resolved, all people share equally in power and wealth, and the proletariat has risen to its rightful place, then the critic can point to a text in which social justice has taken place, citing it as a model of social action.

In the former instance, the Marxist critic operates a warning system that alerts readers to social wrongs; in the latter, he is a mentor to the proletariat, pointing out how they can free themselves from the powerless position in which they have been placed. The intent of both approaches is highly political, aimed as they are at replacing existing systems with socialist ones. The function of literature is to make the populace aware of social ills and sympathetic to action that will wipe those ills away.

The ideology that a text inevitably carries can be found in either its content or its form. That is, a text has both subject matter and a manner of presentation that can either promote or criticize the historical circumstance in which it is set. To many Marxists, it is content that is the more significant of the two; the “what” is more revealing than the “how.”

The “what” is important because it overtly expresses an ideology, a particular view of the social relations of its time and place. It may support the prevailing ideology of the culture, or it can actively seek to show the ideology’s shortcomings and failings. It can strengthen a reader’s values or reveal flaws through characters and events and editorial comment.

If the subject matter is presented sympathetically, then it depicts the social relationships—laws, customs, and values—that are approved by that society in a way that legitimizes them and, by extension, the underlying economic system that has produced them. If, on the other hand, it criticizes the prevailing ideology, it can be equally powerful and persuasive. By depicting the negative aspects of a socioeconomic system—inequity, oppression, and alienation—literature can awaken those who are unfavorably treated by that system. It can make them aware that they are not free, that they (members of the working class) are controlled by the oppressive bourgeoisie (a self-appointed elite). It can be a means of changing the superstructure and the base because it can arouse people to resist their treatment and overthrow unfair systems. At the very least, it can make social inequities and imbalances of power public knowledge.

What is the ideology expressed by the content of “The Diamond Necklace”? It is doubtful that de Maupassant wrote the story to foment revolution among his countrymen. Yet, in it the destructive power of the bourgeoisie’s cool lack of concern for the proletariat is unmistakably depicted. The minor clerk and his wife are almost beneath notice to those who employ them, and the lower the couple falls in their ability to live well, or comfortably, or to survive at all, the less visible or recognizable they become. The denial of beautiful clothes and jewels to Mme. Loisel (while they are available to others no more deserving than she) and the suffering of such inequities causes her carry with them a clear social commentary. Such a society is uncaring and unjust. It exists on assumptions that allow the powerful to keep their comfortable positions only if the powerless remain oppressed and convinced that it is right that they are oppressed.

The manner of presentation (the “how”) can also be instrumental in revealing the ideology of a text, especially when it brings the reader close to the people and events being depicted. For that reason, realistic presentations that clearly depict the time and place in which they are set are preferable to many a Marxist reader because they make it easier to identify with an ideology or to object to it. However, others find in modern and postmodern forms evidence of the fragmentation of contemporary society and the alienation of the individual in it. Although the narrative that is common in an unrealistic manner—that is, through stream of consciousness or surrealism—may make a less overt identification with the socioeconomic ills of capitalism or with socialist principles, it can nevertheless criticize contradictions and inequities found in the world that capitalism has created. The effect of forms on the development of social commentary in a text can be understood by imagining how “The Diamond Necklace” would be changed if, instead of being a realistic depiction given by an omniscient narrator, the story were presented as an internal monologue taking place in the mind of Mme. Loisel or that of her husband or even that of her convent friend. In that presentation, the ideology would shift with each one’s perception of what the social system is and should be, as well as what each has to lose or gain by changing it.

Believing that all products of a culture, including literature, are the results of socioeconomic and ideological conditions, the Marxist critic must have not only an understanding of the subject matter and the form of a work but also a grasp of the historical context in which it was written. The critic must also be aware of the worldview of the author, who wrote not as an individual but as one who reflects the views of a group of people. Such grounding helps the reader identify the ideology that inevitably exists in a text, so that he or she can then analyze how that ideology supports or subverts the power structure it addresses.

Asking some of the following questions will lead you to a deeper understanding of the work you are analyzing. Your answers should lead you to insights about the ideology expressed in the text and perhaps about your own.

- What ideology is revealed by your examination of economic power, materialism, and class conflict in a given work?
WRITING A MARXIST ANALYSIS

There is no prescribed form for writing a Marxist analysis. Doing so is simply a matter of applying Marxist principles in a clearly ordered manner. As a result, one such written critique may look quite different from another but be equally Marxist in its content.

Prewriting

If you have thoughtfully answered the questions listed in the previous section, you will have material to begin your prewriting. If you take those items that yielded the most information or generated your strongest opinions and use them as the basis of a free-write, your thinking will begin to develop along some identifiable lines. It may be that you need only see where the responses you made to some of the questions are evident in the text. Those passages should provide you with examples of your generalizations.

Some questions that will require you to go outside the text for answers, but that can be rewarding to pursue, are those that deal with the historical circumstances of the writer and the text. You may want to take time to do some library work to examine the following topics:

- What are the values of the author’s time and place? Where are they reflected in the text?
- What biographical elements of the author's life can account for his or her ideology? For example, to what social class did the author's family belong? Where is that evident in the text?
- What are the socioeconomic conditions of the writer’s culture? Where are they reflected in the text?
- Who read the work when it was first published? How was it initially received? Was it widely read? Banned? Favorably or unfavorably reviewed?
- What were the circumstances of its publication? Was it quickly accepted, widely distributed, highly promoted? Or was it published with difficulty? Was it given limited distribution?

- Does the work support the values of capitalism or any other “ism” that institutionalizes the domination of one group of people over another—for example, racism, sexism, or imperialism? Or does it condemn such systems?
- Is the work consistent in its ideology? Or does it have inner conflicts?
- Do you find concepts from other schools of literary criticism—for example, cultural studies, feminism, postmodernism—overlapping with this one?
- Does this text make you aware of your own acceptance of any social, economic, or political practices that involve control or oppression of others?
- Does the work accept socialism as historically inevitable as well as desirable?
- Does it criticize repressive systems? Or does it approve of a system that exists by promoting one group of people at the expense of another—for example, a particular ethnic or minority group?
- Where do you see similar situations in your own world?
Regardless of which topics you ultimately decide to develop, the four most important goals of your prewriting are (1) to clarify your understanding of the ideology of the work; (2) to identify the elements of the text that present the ideology; (3) to determine how those elements promote it—that is, convince the reader to accept it; and (4) to assess how sympathetic or opposed it is to Marxist principles. It is important to remember that a text does not have to be Marxist in its orientation to yield itself to an interesting reading from this perspective. Even one that is capitalist or sexist in its outlook can be fruitfully examined to determine how it attracts the reader into accepting its ideology.

It is also reassuring to recognize that Marxist critics do not always agree with each other’s reading of a given text. If your interpretation differs from that of others, it is not necessarily wrong because no single Marxist reading of a work results even when the same principles are applied. In the same manner, Marxism lends itself to combination with other schools of criticism, giving it even more possibilities for variation.

**Drafting and Revising**

**The Introduction** In a Marxist analysis, it can be effective to announce the ideology of the text and its relationship to Marxist views at the outset. Because the rest of your essay will be concerned with where and how the ideology is worked out, it is important that your reader share your understanding of the stance taken by the text. If you find this approach to be too dry, boring, and didactic, you might begin with a summary of an incident in the work that illustrates the social relationships of the characters or some other socioeconomic aspect of the society as preparation for your statement of the work’s overall worldview.

**The Body** The central part of your essay will demonstrate the acceptance or rejection of Marxist principles in the text you are analyzing. It is in this part that the organizational principles will be of your own design. That is, you may choose to discuss each major character, assess the nature of the social institutions depicted, or point out the struggles between groups of people. The approach you take will in large part be dictated by the work itself. For example, an analysis of "The Diamond Necklace" could be built around the decline of the power and place of M. and Mme. Loisel as they are forced to repay the cost of the necklace, or it could illustrate the unjust treatment they receive from those in the powerful, controlling classes of society. It could even compare and contrast the differences between the lives of the Loisels and those of the rich and powerful. Of course, these are overlapping issues, and it is difficult to focus on one without noting the other. Once you have addressed any such topic, you will quickly find yourself with comments to make about others that are related to it.

Because there is no particular form to follow in writing a Marxist analysis, you may fall back on some of the techniques discussed in Chapter 2, “Familiar Approaches.” It might be helpful to think about the usefulness of explanation, comparison and contrast, and analysis. In any case, during revision you will want to be sure that each of your points is equally developed and that all are linked together in a logical sequence. Making an outline (after drafting) to check whether you have managed to provide adequate coverage and coherence is helpful because it can give you an overview of what you have done. If the parts are not balanced in length, depth, or content, you will need to make adjustments.

**The Conclusion** The conclusion of a Marxist analysis often takes either the form of an endorsement of classless societies in which everyone has equal access to power and goods or of criticism of repressive societies when that is not the case. The conclusion may once again make a case for social reform, pointing out where the literary work under consideration has either supported or rejected social change. In either case, to write the conclusion you will need to consider how the ideology in the text affirms or conflicts with your own.

That assessment may lead to a second possibility for your conclusion. That is, you may find it interesting to reflect on what the work has revealed to you about your own ideology. Perhaps you discovered that you have uncritically accepted the principles of socioeconomic-political movements that are controlling and oppressive. Perhaps your analysis has made you aware that principles you took as "given" or "natural" or "just the way things are" are actually socially constructed and can be changed in ways that make society more just and balanced. If so, explaining your realization can provide a powerful ending to your analysis.
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English 123

Sample Response Paper: Applying Marxist Criticism to Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery”
19 Aug. 2014

Man’s Humanity to Man

Robert Burns claimed in 1784 in his poem “Man Was Made to Mourn: A Dirge” that “Man’s inhumanity to man / Makes countless thousands mourn” (lines 55-6), ironically characterizing cruelty as an inhuman and primitive trait despite the human tendency to be cruel, which his poem so clearly acknowledged and illustrated. Shirley Jackson, author of the short story “The Lottery,” would disagree with the assumption that cruelty is inhuman. She had no such illusions or expectations of humanity’s essential benevolence. Examined through the lens of Marxist Criticism, Jackson’s story “The Lottery” reveals how the economic and social wellbeing of the community is linked to its rituals, which in turn paint a picture of humanity as inherently, naturally cruel and condemns humanity as ultimately irredeemably savage.

While the villagers do not seem to know precisely why the annual ritual sacrifice is necessary, nor does Jackson choose to reveal the rationale to the reader, suggesting that religious rites and brutality have no reason and need no reason to exist, it is believed by the villagers to be necessary for the continuing economic and social wellbeing of the community. Old Man Warner, the oldest resident, reminds the others of the saying, “Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon” (967), which makes the most direct connection between the ritual and prosperity, suggesting that the villagers or their ancestors, rather, believed that a good harvest was made possible by this ritual sacrifice. The fact that the village is still a farming community makes it
clear that this ideology linking the ritual and its effect is still relevant and pervasive even if the majority of the community cannot remember or recite it. Their livelihood is clearly foremost on their minds as the men, who are responsible for providing that livelihood, talk about “planting and rain, tractors and taxes” (964), all of which play a role in their collective and individual economic wellbeing, whether to distract themselves from the horror or to remind themselves of why they participate in it. Tessie Hutchinson’s explanation of her lateness being due to not wanting to leave her unwashed dishes in the sink adds to this picture of economic wellbeing; after all, for there to be dishes to wash, there must have been food to dirty them with. While it is men’s role to provide sustenance, it is women’s to receive and prepare it, so they are all participants in and contributors to the daily rituals of their survival and wellbeing, and they are all, therefore, also participants in and perpetuators of the annual ritual sacrifice. As long as they cling to the ideology that their wellbeing is dependent on this ritual savagery, they will all also participate in and perpetuate it.

Shirley Jackson’s cynicism, reflected in the story’s unapologetic portrait of humanity as irrevocably savage, is deeply disturbing, and it’s understandable why audiences then and now have been both transfixed and outraged by her story. The horror it confronts us with may be a fiction, but that doesn’t negate its truth, especially the potential to recognize ourselves in the villagers. Haven’t we individually and collectively faced situations when we have been silent in the face of injustice, when we have clung to traditions that allowed the perpetuation of injustice, when we have chosen to protect ourselves and preserve our wellbeing by sacrificing other people and their wellbeing, sometimes without question or hesitation? When it comes down to it, their humanity is ours. If Tessie Hutchinson’s final outcry is an ironic protest against the human
tendency to allow and perpetuate brutality, meant for us to hear as Jackson’s appeal to us, there seems to be little expectation that we will, in fact, hear it.
Cultural Criticism: Postcolonialism and Multiculturalism

Preparing to read and write using the lens of Postcolonial and Multicultural Criticism: Postcolonial Criticism examines and comments on texts produced in or about formerly colonized regions, noting the effects of colonization on both the colonizer and the colonized as well as the responses to colonization also by both colonizer and colonized.

It is currently being debated whether to include literature of minorities in the U.S. (and England) in Postcolonial literature. Many of the terms critics use when analyzing a text through a Postcolonial Criticism lens are similarly applicable when looking at literature of the U.S. through the lens of Multicultural Criticism. (Refer to the list of terms/concepts listed in the following pages.) When writing about texts of the U.S., instead of colonizer and colonized, we might use the terms oppressor and oppressed or dominant and minority/subjugated culture. Still, it is possible to argue that what happens in the U.S., traditionally referred to as assimilation or Americanization, is, in fact, a form of cultural colonization though no apparent political or military colonization preceded it. Consider the “politics” of the traditional metaphor of “the Melting Pot” for the assimilation/Americanization process as well as other (more recent) versions modifying or challenging it (“the Salad Bowl,” “Mosaic”).

You might also notice overlap with Gender, specifically Feminist, Criticism as well as Marxist Criticism given that all of these literary criticisms focus on the construction of social identity as well as access, relationships, and responses to power. The main difference is that the lens of Postcolonial and Multicultural Criticism focuses on cultural, racial, or ethnic identity, differences, and conflict (as opposed to those of gender and class).

It can be difficult to notice (the relevance of) postcolonialism or multiculturalism in literature that lacks evidence of colonization or minority representation. It is hard to “see” culture when there is no apparent cultural difference to provide a basis for comparison and questioning. However, we might use the tools of Deconstruction and Gender Criticism to see the culture as if from an outsider’s perspective, examining the ideologies, customs, and traditions (the cultural imperatives) those inside the culture take for granted as well as their conformity to and subtle questioning or challenging of those cultural imperatives. It is difficult but necessary to distinguish culture from gender and class norms and ideologies though gender and class norms and ideologies often do derive from or are dictated by culture.

As with the other literary criticisms, you need to use Postcolonial or Multicultural Criticism to focus your close reading/analysis of the text, and you need to prove your Postcolonial or Multicultural Criticism argument with that close reading/analysis.

Also, while research is not excluded from Postcolonial or Multicultural Criticism, the way it is from New Criticism and Deconstruction, it is not mandatory as it is in New Historicism. However, as with New Historicism, if you elect to do research, you are, nevertheless, expected to focus your argument on close reading/analysis of the text, using the research to support or deepen your argument and interpretation (not simply alongside or in place of your argument/interpretation). In addition, if you elect to do research, you are obligated to avoid plagiarism by following the conventions of MLA Style research when quoting, paraphrasing, and summarizing primary and secondary sources and to select and evaluate secondary sources according to their validity and appropriateness so that they strengthen rather than weaken your argument and credibility.
Final note:
It is not enough to argue that a character or characters belong to a particular group (colonizer/oppressor or colonized/oppressed) though proving the belonging as well as showing the specific nature of that belonging is a necessary step. In addition, one must explain what belonging to this group means or reveals (in terms of access to power, effects on identity, etc.) in this particular text (what the author/text is saying about this belonging) as well as the author’s or text’s purpose in revealing this meaning: to uphold, question, condemn, etc., it and the status quo. As with any good claim, the claim of your Postcolonial Criticism response paper or essay should focus on a single specific, unified argument.

Read over the following pages to gain a better understanding of the terms and concepts associated with Postcolonial Criticism and how to apply it to your literary analysis:

Key Terms/Concepts

Excerpted from Philip Irving Mitchell’s “Key Terms in Post-Colonial Theory” (with some edits):

Colonialism: The imperialist expansion of Europe into the rest of the world during the last four hundred years in which a dominant [nation] carried on a relationship of control and influence over its margins or colonies. This relationship tended to extend to social, pedagogical, economic, political, and . . . cultural[] exchanges often with a hierarchical European settler class and local, educated elite class forming layers between the European “mother” nation and the various indigenous peoples who were controlled. Such a system carried within it inherent notions of racial inferiority and exotic otherness.

Postcolonialism: A study of the effects of colonialism on cultures and societies. It is concerned with 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, has gone and continues to go through 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
3. a growing awareness of cultural overlap and hybridity.

Ambivalence: the ambiguous way in which colonizer and colonized regard one another. The colonizer often regards the colonized as both inferior yet exotically other, while the colonized regards the colonizer as both enviable yet corrupt. In a context of hybridity, this often produces a mixed sense of blessing and curse.

Alterity: "the state of being other or different"; the political, cultural, linguistic, or religious other. The study of the ways in which one group makes themselves different from others.

Colonial education: the process by which a colonizing power assimilates either a subaltern native elite or a larger population to its way of thinking and seeing the world.

Diaspora: the voluntary or enforced migration of peoples from their native homelands. Diaspora literature is often concerned with questions of maintaining or altering identity, language, and culture while in another culture or country.
**Essentialism:** the essence or "whatness" of something. In the context of race, ethnicity, or culture, essentialism suggests the practice of various groups deciding what is and isn't a particular identity. As a practice, essentialism tends to overlook differences within groups often to maintain the status quo or obtain power. Essentialist claims can be used by a colonizing power but also by the colonized as a way of resisting what is claimed about them.

**Ethnicity:** a fusion of traits that belong to a group—shared values, beliefs, norms, tastes, behaviors, experiences, memories, and loyalties. Often deeply related to a person’s identity.

**Exoticism:** the process by which a cultural practice is made stimulating and exciting in its difference from the [colonizer]'s normal perspective. Ironically, as European groups educated local, indigenous cultures, schoolchildren often began to see their native lifeways, plants, and animals as exotic and the European counterparts as “normal” or “typical.”

**Hegemony:** the power of the [dominant] class [culture, or group] to convince other classes (cultures, or groups) that their interests are the interests of all, often not only through means of economic and political control but more subtly through the control of education and media.

**Hybridity:** new transcultural forms that arise from cross-cultural exchange. Hybridity can be social, political, linguistic, religious, etc. It is not necessarily a peaceful mixture, for it can be contentious and disruptive in its experience. Note the two related definitions:

- **catalysis:** the (specifically New World) experience of several ethnic groups interacting and mixing with each other often in a contentious environment that gives way to new forms of identity and experience.
- **creolization:** societies that arise from a mixture of ethnic and racial mixing to form a new material, psychological, and spiritual self-definition.

**Identity:** the way in which an individual and/or group defines itself. Identity is important to self-concept, social mores, and national understanding. It often involves both essentialism and othering.

**Ideology:** “a system of values, beliefs, or ideas shared by some social group and often taken for granted as natural or inherently true” (Bordwell & Thompson 494).

**Language:** In the context of colonialism and post-colonialism, language has often become a site for both colonization and resistance. In particular, a return to the original indigenous language is often advocated since the language was suppressed by colonizing forces. The use of European languages is a much debated issue among postcolonial authors.

- **abrogation:** a refusal to use the language of the colonizer in a correct or standard way.
- **appropriation:** “the process by which the language is made to ‘bear the burden’ of one’s own cultural experience.”

**Mapping:** the mapping of global space in the context of colonialism was as much prescriptive as it was descriptive. Maps were used to assist in the process of aggression, and they were also used to establish claims. Maps claim[] the boundaries of a nation, for example.

**Metanarrative:** (“grand narratives,” “master narratives”) a large cultural story that seeks to explain within its borders all the little, local narratives. A metanarrative claims to be a big truth concerning the world and the way it works. Some charge that all metanarratives are inherently oppressive because they decide whether other narratives are allowed or not.
Orientalism: the process (from the late eighteenth century to the present) by which “the Orient” was constructed as an exotic other by European studies and culture. Orientalism is not so much a true study of other cultures as it is broad Western generalization about Oriental, Islamic, and/or Asian cultures that tends to erode and ignore their substantial differences.

Other: the social and/or psychological ways in which one group excludes or marginalizes another group. By declaring someone “Other,” someone, persons tend to stress what makes them dissimilar from or opposite of another, and this carries over into the way they represent others, especially through stereotypical images.

- **Demonic other:** the view that those who are different from oneself are not only backward but also savage, even evil.
- **Exotic other:** the view that those who are different from oneself possess an inherent dignity and beauty, perhaps because of their more undeveloped, natural [i.e., primitive] state of being. [Note: The assumption of inferiority remains; the view is more romanticized but no less stereotypical.]

**In addition:** The term refers to colonized peoples. It carries with it the negative view of them held by their colonizers, who assume that those who are different form themselves are inferior beings. (Dobie)

Othering: the practice of viewing those who are different from oneself as inferior beings; othering is used to divide people and to justify hierarchies.

Race: the division and classification of human beings by physical and biological characteristics. Race often is used by various groups to either maintain power or to stress solidarity. In the 18th and 19th centuries, it was often used as a pretext by European colonial powers for slavery and/or the “white man’s burden.”

Semiotics: a system of signs by which one knows what something is. Cultural semiotics often provide the means by which a group defines itself or by which a colonializing power attempts to control and assimilate another group.

Space/Place: Space represents a geographic locale, one empty in not being designated. Place, on the other hand, is what happens when a space is made or owned. Place involves landscape, language, environment, culture, etc.

Subaltern: the lower or colonized classes who have little access to their own means of expression and are thus dependent upon the language and methods of the ruling class to express themselves. **In addition:** A person of inferior status. The subordinate position of subalterns may be based on gender, class, race, ethnicity or culture. Subaltern writers seek to make their marginalized cultures which are largely unrecognized by history known and valued for their past and present. (Dobie)

Worlding: the process by which a person, family, culture, or people is brought into the dominant Eurocentric/Western global society.

Excerpted from Ann Dobie’s “Glossary of Terms Used in Literary Criticism” in *Theory into Practice: An Introduction to Literary Criticism*:

Culture: the sum of the social patterns, traits, and products of a particular time or group of people. It includes the ideas, customs, skills, clothing, language, and arts that characterize the era or community.
**Cultural colonization:** the imposition of the beliefs and social practices of a dominant power on a subjugated one, resulting in loss or change of the native [or minority/subjugated] culture. Cultural colonization often follows political or military colonization.

**Eurocentrism:** the assumption that European ideals and experiences are the standard by which all other cultures are to be measured and judged inferior.

**Mimicry:** Imitation of the dress, manners, and language[, etc.] of the dominant culture by an oppressed one.

Excerpted from *Encyclopedia Britannica:*

**Acculturation:** the processes of change in artifacts, customs, and beliefs that result from the contact of two or more cultures. The term is also used to refer to the results of such changes. Two major types of acculturation, **incorporation** and **directed change**, may be distinguished on the basis of the conditions under which cultural contact and change take place.

**Incorporation** refers to the free borrowing and modification of cultural elements and occurs when people of different cultures maintain contact as well as political and social self-determination. It may involve **syncretism**, a process through which people create a new synthesis of phenomena that differs from either original culture; adoption, in which an entirely new phenomenon is added to a cultural repertoire; and adaptation, in which a new material or technology is applied to an extant phenomenon. Because incorporation is a product of free choice, the changes it engenders are often retained over the long term.

In contrast, **directed change** occurs when one group establishes dominance over another through military conquest or political control; thus, imperialism (colonialism/colonization) is the most common precursor to directed change. Like incorporation, directed change involves the selection and modification of cultural characteristics. However, these processes are more varied and the results more complex because they derive from the interference in one cultural system by members of another. The processes that operate under conditions of directed change include forced **assimilation**—the complete replacement of one culture by another—and resistance against aspects of the dominant culture. Because directed change is imposed upon the members of the recipient culture, often quite harshly, the changes it engenders are less likely to be maintained over the long term. (The Editors of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*)

**Assimilation:** the process whereby individuals or groups of differing ethnic heritage are absorbed into the dominant culture of a society. The process of assimilating involves taking on the traits of the dominant culture to such a degree that the assimilating group becomes socially indistinguishable from other members of the society. As such, assimilation is the most extreme form of acculturation. Although assimilation may be compelled through force or undertaken voluntarily, it is rare for a minority group to replace its previous cultural practices completely; religion, food preferences, proxemics (e.g., the physical distance between people in a given social situation), and aesthetics are among the characteristics that tend to be most resistant to change. Assimilation does not denote “racial” or biological fusion, though such fusion may occur. (Elizabeth Prine Pauls)
Postcolonial Criticism

The subject matter of postcolonial literature is marked by its concern for ambiguity or loss of identity. Written by culturally displaced people, it investigates the clash of cultures in which one seems itself to be superior and imposes its own practices on the less powerful one. Its writers examine their histories, question how they should respond to the changes they see around them, and wonder what their society will become. They recognize in themselves the old culture and the new, elements of the native one and the imposed one. The result is writing that is critical of the conquerors and promotive of its own ideologies.

Postcolonial literary criticism, which began to attract widespread notice in the early 1990s, looks at the works of postcolonial writers but is not limited to them. Because its practitioners are interested in how the colonized came to accept the values of the more powerful culture and also to resist them, it looks at canonical texts as well as postcolonial ones. Attitudes toward the “other” are evident in works that may not, on the surface, seem to deal with colonialism at all. Helen Tiffin argues in “Post-colonial Literatures and Counter-discourse” that because a precolonial past cannot be regained and contemporary identity cannot be free of that past, the real job of postcolonial criticism is “to investigate the means by which Europe imposed and maintained... colonial domination of so much of the rest of the world.” She suggests that the way to do this is to use “canonical counter-discourse,” a process in which one examines “a character or characters, or the basic assumptions of a British canonical text, and unweaves [colonialist] assumptions, subverting the text for postcolonial purposes.” By extension, the whole colonialist discourse in which that text participates is revealed.

In looking at Jane Eyre, for example, Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle discover a strong racial theme in the novel. By bringing Bertha Mason, Rochester’s Creole wife (from the West Indies), to the center of the narrative, they make the allusions and images that refer to slavery and the slave trade, heretofore mostly ignored, important keys to prevailing social attitudes. Whereas traditional criticism has in large part overlooked Bertha, who lives as a madwoman locked in the attic, and has left the assumptions about her unexamined, Bennett and Royle uncover the ideology implicit in the unquestioned acceptance of her invisibility, imprisonment, and displacement from her homeland. Before their analysis, she was seen as a threat because of her madness. They make it possible to view her, instead, as a sufferer who has been driven mad. The roles of villain and victim are reversed, providing through this new perspective on a much-read novel additional insight into colonialist and anticolonialist thinking.

Basic Assumptions

The lack of total agreement about what postcolonialism is or whom it involves makes it difficult to set down its basic principles and purposes. Further complicating the situation is the fact that different cultures have responded to colonization in different ways, making it impossible to subscribe to any single way of approaching postcolonial studies. With those reservations in mind, the following assumptions and generalizations are by and large accepted as important to postcolonial theory:

- Colonizers not only physically conquer territories but also practice cultural colonization by replacing the practices and beliefs of the native culture with their own values, governance, laws, and belief. The consequence is loss or modification of much of the precolonial culture.
- When their own culture is forbidden or devalued, natives come to see themselves as inferior to the conquerors. They abandon (or hide) their own cultural practices to adopt (imitate) those of the assumedly “superior” one.
- Colonial subjects practice mimicry—imitation of dress, language, behavior, even gestures—instead of resistance. In Black Skin, White Masks, published in 1952, Franz Fanon, a psychiatrist, reasoned that the inferiority complex created in black people who have accepted the culture of another country as their own will cause them to imitate the codes of their colonizers. As the colonized become better educated and able to live as their white counterparts, they become increasingly imitative. Homi Bhabha points out that the mimicry is never exact, however; it is “at once resemblance and menace.” The colonizer both wants and fears that the colonized will be like him because the imitation honors and, at the same time, undermines the “authoritative discourse” of colonialism.
- European colonizers believed that their ideals and experiences were universal. As a concept, universalism is evident in the characters and themes in European (and, later, American) literature.
- The European colonizers assumed the superiority of their own culture and the inferiority of the conquerors. They thought of themselves as
civilized, even advanced, and of the colonists as backward, even savage. Using their own culture as the standard for what any culture should be, a practice known as Eurocentrism, the powerful justify the imposition of their own culture on those they deemed to be of lesser status, the subalterns.

- The practice of othering, viewing those who are different from oneself as inferior beings, divides people and justifies hierarchies. Sometimes the dominant culture sees the "other" as evil, in which case it is known as the demonic other.
- On other occasions, the "other" is deemed to have a natural beauty, to be the exotic other.
- Colonizers also become the colonized. In this two-way process, the Europeans, too, were affected by their contact with other cultures.
- The effects of past colonialism are still evident today, and a new form of colonialism is currently effected by international corporations operating in developing nations.
- The interaction of cultures creates blended ones, mixtures of the native and colonial, a process called hybridity or syncretism. Characterized by tensions and change, this process is dynamic, interactive, and creative. As Bhabha explained in an interview with Gary Olson and Lynn Worsham, "For me, hybridization is a discursive, enunciantory, cultural, subjective process having to do with the struggle around authority, authorization, deauthorization, and the revision of authority. It's a social process. It's not about persons of diverse cultural tastes and fashions."

Reading as a Postcolonialist

A postcolonial analysis begins with the assumption that examining the relationship between a text and its context will illuminate not only the given work but also the culture that produced and consumed it. In the end, you may not agree with everything you find in either of them, but you will emerge with a deeper understanding of how and why a text is meaningful. In turn, the process gives greater validity to your judgments about a body of literature and the community associated with it. The postcolonial reader will generally be alert and sensitive to the presence of the elements that recur in the literature, which are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Presentation of Colonialism The central question of postcolonial criticism addresses the stance of the text toward the mixed colonial culture that it depicts or that produced it. What attitudes does the text reflect regarding the colonizers and the colonized? A wide range of viewpoints is possible, for the historical development of a culture, the relationships between its cultural groups, and the daily stresses of mixing people of different backgrounds make for a complex situation. The understanding of such matters will likely be expressed in fairly subde ways, and there may be no single unconflicted attitude because the question, even after years of trying, is not easily answered.

You can begin to examine the attitudes toward colonialism that exist in a work by asking the following questions:

- Is the work critical of colonialism, approving of it, or ambivalent about its value?
- Does the narrator speak as an observer or a participant in the story’s cultural setting?
- What traditions and practices serve to maintain the cultural hierarchy in the work?

Treatment of Characters It is in the portrayals of colonizers and the colonized that the larger picture becomes evident. The reader can begin by asking whether the depictions are positive or negative. Whose deeds are celebrated and whose repudged? The assumptions about characters, both spoken and unspoken, will indicate whether the work supports or resists the ideology and practices of colonialism.

Insight into the attitudes of the characters can come from asking the following questions:

- What descriptive terms characterize the depiction of the characters who are the colonizers?
- What descriptive terms characterize the depiction of the colonized characters?
- What is the relationship between the colonized and the colonizers in the narrative?

Validity of the Narrative It is important to establish whether the events are exaggerated. Is political and cultural domination presented explicitly or allegorically? Is the whole story being told? Are some elements contrary to what actually happened? Are the rationalizations believable? Knowing something about the author, including his or her background, opinions, and purposes, can sometimes be helpful in this regard.

Because The Road from Coorain is autobiographical, and the writer has validity in the eyes of the reader, the narrative is straightforward and rings true. The writer does not indulge in exaggeration or even satire, except for an occasional comic look at human foibles. If you are interested in testing the validity of a narrative, the questions posed in the previous paragraph can be applied to any piece of postcolonial literature.

Expressions of Nativism (Nationalism) Out of a desire to resurrect the precolonial culture, some postcolonial writers consciously use elements of native culture and expunge elements of the imposed one. It is one way to rediscover native identity and declare its worth. Several problems lie in this approach, however. When writers publish works written in their own language, for instance, they usually meet a limited reading audience because too few people are likely to be proficient at comprehending it. Some people also argue that the attempt is inherently flawed because all cultures change; even without the intervention of an outside oppressor, what once was, even if one could find it out, would no longer be. Finally, postcolonial cultures are hybrid ones, and any attempt to go back to a "pure" culture is unrealistic.
Conway, writing as a native-born Australian but not as a member of the indigenous population, makes no attempt to disown her British heritage. Instead, she writes from the postcolonial perspective of a hybrid culture that combines both the native one and the dominating one. Sometimes the contrasts she experienced make for illogical or amusing situations. For example, the requirement at Abbotsleigh that the girls wear uniforms designed for an English climate leaves them in summer in "tartan green linen dresses with cream collars, the same green flannel" blazer, beige socks, a cream Panama hat, and the same brown gloves." She continues, "Woe betide the student caught shedding the blazer or the gloves in public, even when the thermometer was over 100 degrees... No one paused to think that gloves and blazers had a function in damp English springs which they lacked entirely in our blazing sun." Such irrational practices left the girls, as Conway says, "only partially at home in our environment." She is referring to the sense of unhomeless, of being caught between two cultures and not entirely at home in either of them. Another way of describing her situation is to say that she is experiencing double consciousness, for she has an awareness of being part of both the colonized and the colonizing cultures and thus of being the recipient of all the conflicts and contrasts that exist between them.

The following are some questions that can help the reader examine the elements of nativism in a story:

- Does the story refer only to native elements of the culture, or does it depict a hybrid culture?
- Which characters experience unhomelessness?
- Where do you find instances of double consciousness?

Recurring Subjects and Themes Some postcolonial texts look to the past, rehearsing the pains of othering and the humiliations of mimicry. They retell the stories of the initial colonization and trace changes in the native culture. Others record the sense of double consciousness and unhomelessness experienced by those who belong to both past and present and to neither. Still other texts look to the future, reaching for a definition of the new hybrid identity (both personal and communal) and an ideology that will serve its needs. In all cases, postcolonial texts reveal the complexity of cultural identity in a colonized world.

As already noted, _The Road from Coombe_ is the story of Conway's double consciousness and unhomelessness as it evolves into a personal identity. It also points to the practice of mimicry as one of the chief ways by which the colonizer's presence was maintained. Nowhere is that more evident than at Abbotsleigh, where Eurocentrism reigned. The school administrators made it clear by social rules, curriculum, and the example of its leaders that England was the standard by which all people and practices were to be measured. In the formality of the dinner table (where the girls, wearing green velvet dresses, were seated in descending order of age and class), in the absence of references to Australian art and literature in their classes, and in virtually all practices at Abbotsleigh, it was British culture that was imitated and admired. For example, Conway notes that in the study of literature, she and her classmates "might have been in Sussex" because their reading consisted of Shakespeare and Shelley, not of the writers of their own country. Australia, then, was defined by default, by what it was not. The girls were left to conclude that because its countryside did not look like the Cotswolds and the Lake Country, it must be ugly; and because its paintings were not mentioned, there must not be any. History pointed out that people of any importance lived somewhere else. The teachers dutifully corrected the girls' speech so that it would conform to standard British pronunciation, unmarred by Australian patterns. In short, "The best standards were derived from Great Britain, and should be emulated unquestioningly." And just in case the message was not clear, geography lessons featured maps with the holdings of the British Empire colored bright red. Obviously, the closest an Australian could come to being judged superior was by mimicry, by being British, even if only partly so.

The subjects and themes of postcolonial literature can be found by asking the following questions:

- Does the narrative look to the past, examine the present, or hypothesize a possible future?
- Where is imitation of the cultural standard depicted, and what is the effect of mimicry on those who are expected to practice it?
- How do specific characters struggle to develop a personal identity by reconciling the two cultures in which they live?

Context Every work has a context, and studying context lies at the heart of postcolonial literary study. Whereas interpreters of a culture sometimes derive insights about it by reading its literature, a postcolonialist critic will look to almost every aspect of a culture to illuminate a text. Significant elements may be social or material; they may be drawn from the culture that produced the text or the culture of its interpreters. For the reader interested in deepening his or her understanding of a work, the process means examining the interaction of the two, which can be a time-consuming business if for no other reason than that it is difficult to know when one has done enough. The complex relationship between text and context, each a product and creator of the other, is called negotiation.

The context of Conway's story and the context of its telling are not the same. That is, it is told from the distance of another country, personal independence, and intellectual growth. She has written it from the perspective of one who has moved far enough away from a place and a personal history to achieve insight that is not often found while immersed in them. It is interesting to speculate, for example, whether Conway would have been moved to write about growing up entrenched in colonialist mentality if she had not left it behind. Then, too, the changing social attitudes of the 1960s and later must have influenced her, as they did others, to question the traditional ways of evaluating what is good and what should be, a process that is important to her story. The times and her changing place have allowed her to see her past with greater clarity, and her remembrances shed light on the times, past and present.
The text and its contexts can be examined by asking the following questions:

- Are the context of the story and the context of its telling the same or different? If different, how do they affect each other?
- Where do you observe negotiation—that is, the impact of the context on the text and of the text on its context?
- What significant public events in the writer's life can be said to have contributed to his or her views?

Minor Characters As in the analysis of Jane Eyre mentioned earlier, previously unnoticed assumptions in a work can sometimes be detected by paying attention to the characters who do not hold center stage. By noting their treatment and the language used to describe them, attitudes about colonizers and colonized peoples that have gone unnoticed, especially in canonical works, may become evident.

Conway's classmates at the public school she briefly attended are never mentioned by name, and perhaps they were never even known as individuals. In the full scope of the autobiography, they play bit parts. Nevertheless, her brief encounter with them speaks volumes about the class structure of postwar Australia. For example, the superior attitude that she naturally assumed toward them, on the basis of the stereotypes and judgments given to her by her family and their friends, is symptomatic of the elitism common to her class. The jeering schoolmates are well aware of the social gulf between them, and they reflect an authentic Australian culture that is scorned by those who have assumed the colonizers' consciousness of class.

Minor characters can become significant when a reader asks the following questions:

- Which minor characters typify major cultural attitudes?
- How does the principal character view specific minor characters?
- Where do minor characters embody cultural conflict?

Political Statement and Innuendo The question here is whether and how a work promotes resistance to colonialism. Does the text make ideological statements or support a particular course of political, economic, or social action? Does it take up the case for or against a particular group of people? Or does it attempt to present the complexity of the situation without taking a stand on it?

Great Britain. Her escape from such smallness of vision came with her move to the United States for graduate study and her subsequent marriage to a Canadian. Her cultural identity has continued to grow—in one sense, making for greater complexity of definition, but in another making for deeper understanding of what it means to reject the colonial mentality as one works out an individual identity. In the end, her own liberation from colonialist boundaries and definitions and her assumption of an identity that has been enriched by numerous cultures make her a model of what citizens of a shrinking world are likely to become. In that way, her autobiography provides a quiet but powerful ideological statement.

The political stance of a literary work may be obvious or subtle. The reader can identify it by asking the following questions:

- Does the text make overt political statements? Does it openly promote a particular social or economic agenda?
- Does it admire characters who stand for a stated cause?
- Does it criticize those who represent a specific ideology?

U.S. MULTICULTURALISM

Since the 1960s, U.S. society has undergone radical changes in how it conceives of social structures. School desegregation, new laws banning discrimination, and the demise of old laws that promoted discrimination have opened the door to opportunity for people who had traditionally been shut out. Within such marginalized groups, the renaissance of valued traditions that differ from those of the dominant group has served to enhance self-esteem and reassert distinct identities. In turn, the richness of cultures that had heretofore been ignored or reviled has come to the attention not only of those who belong to them but of a wider public as well. The arts, crafts, rituals, and religion of American Indians, Hispanics, African Americans, and other historically overlooked groups are now generating increasing interest in the many strands that make up U.S. society, allowing people to be less confined by a single way of seeing their lives. Of all such groups, African American culture, burdened with problems from the moment of its introduction to the New World, has probably received more attention than any others. For that reason, it will be discussed here as a model of how cultural studies of other marginalized groups can be made.
Man's Humanity to Man

Robert Burns claimed in 1784 in his poem “Man Was Made to Mourn: A Dirge” that “Man’s inhumanity to man / Makes countless thousands mourn” (lines 55-6), ironically characterizing cruelty as an inhuman and primitive trait despite the human tendency to be cruel, which his poem so clearly acknowledged and illustrated. Shirley Jackson, author of the short story “The Lottery,” would disagree with the assumption that cruelty is inhuman. She had no such illusions or expectations of humanity’s essential benevolence. The lens of Multicultural Criticism reveals Jackson’s implicit cynicism. Indeed, her story “The Lottery” paints a picture of humanity as inherently, naturally cruel and condemns humanity as ultimately irredeemably savage.

Ultimately, the ritual of the lottery is so ingrained in this community that it represents their master narrative. It defines who they are, their culture. The setting lets us know immediately the importance of the lottery as it’s held centrally “in the square, between the post office and the bank” (Jackson 963), themselves significant social institutions, and in the middle of the workday, “people . . . gather[ing] . . . around ten o’clock in the morning . . . and . . . [getting] through in time . . . for noon dinner (963), the main meal. That they can eat and go on with their everyday lives immediately after the ritual killing also shows its integration into their society, how minimally disruptive it is. It is a cultural norm everyone in the village participates
in and expects to participate in. They know its rules down to the gathering and selection of stones. The boys early on integrate the stones into their games (963-4), and the women at the end are clearly aware both of the objective to kill the selected individual as well as each individual’s obligation to participate in the killing according to her abilities, so “Mrs. Delacroix selected a stone so large she had to pick it up with both hands . . . [whereas] Mrs. Dunbar had stones in both hands” (969). They both also urge each other on, Mrs. Delacroix “turn[ing] to Mrs. Dunbar . . . and [saying,] ‘Hurry up,’” and Mrs. Dunbar responding, “gasping for breath: ‘I can’t run at all. You’ll have to go ahead and I’ll catch up with you’” (969). Here, too, we might notice that “someone [takes the time to give] Davy Hutchinson [Tessie Hutchinson’s young son] a few pebbles” (969); no one is exempt from the cultural tradition as no one can be exempt from the culture he or she belongs to. The conformity or assimilation to a common culture is signaled by the names, which are typically Anglo-Saxon in origin or, like Delacroix, have been Americanized. The story indicates that “the villagers pronounced this name ‘Dellacroy’” (964), suggesting that the village, not the family, made this decision, imposing the new pronunciation in order to assimilate the family and their name into the existing dominant culture, mirroring the way residents are folded into participation in the lottery. Belonging to this culture means adopting its cultural norms, its master narrative. One final indicator that the lottery is a cultural norm is the fact that the ritual has changed and grown with the community, so aspects, like the original black box, wood chips, “a perfunctory tuneless chant . . . and ritual salute” (965) performed by the lottery official, have been replaced by more modern paraphernalia, like the current black box, slips of paper, and the informal greeting of each person by Mr. Summers (964-5). There is also mention that other towns have either given up the lottery or discussed the possibility of doing so (966-7), suggesting that such a radical change is possible. However,
resistance to both the small and radical changes and nostalgia for what's been lost are presented along with the mention of the changes themselves. Cultures, too, change slowly, organically, and reluctantly, often with nostalgia for a past believed to have been better and now lost. This slowness and reluctance to change as well as the accompanying nostalgia, given that the culture the villagers are perpetuating is human savagery, are the evidence that most strongly condemns humanity and best reveals Shirley Jackson’s cynicism about what it means to be human.

Shirley Jackson’s cynicism, reflected in the story’s unapologetic portrait of humanity as irrevocably savage, is deeply disturbing, and it’s understandable why audiences then and now have been both transfixed and outraged by her story. The horror it confronts us with may be a fiction, but that doesn’t negate its truth, especially the potential to recognize ourselves in the villagers. Haven’t we individually and collectively faced situations when we have been silent in the face of injustice, when we have clung to traditions that allowed the perpetuation of injustice, when we have chosen to protect ourselves and preserve our wellbeing by sacrificing other people and their wellbeing, sometimes without question or hesitation? When it comes down to it, their humanity is ours. If Tessie Hutchinson’s final outcry is an ironic protest against the human tendency to allow and perpetuate brutality, meant for us to hear as Jackson’s appeal to us, there seems to be little expectation that we will, in fact, hear it.