



# Critical Approaches to Literature

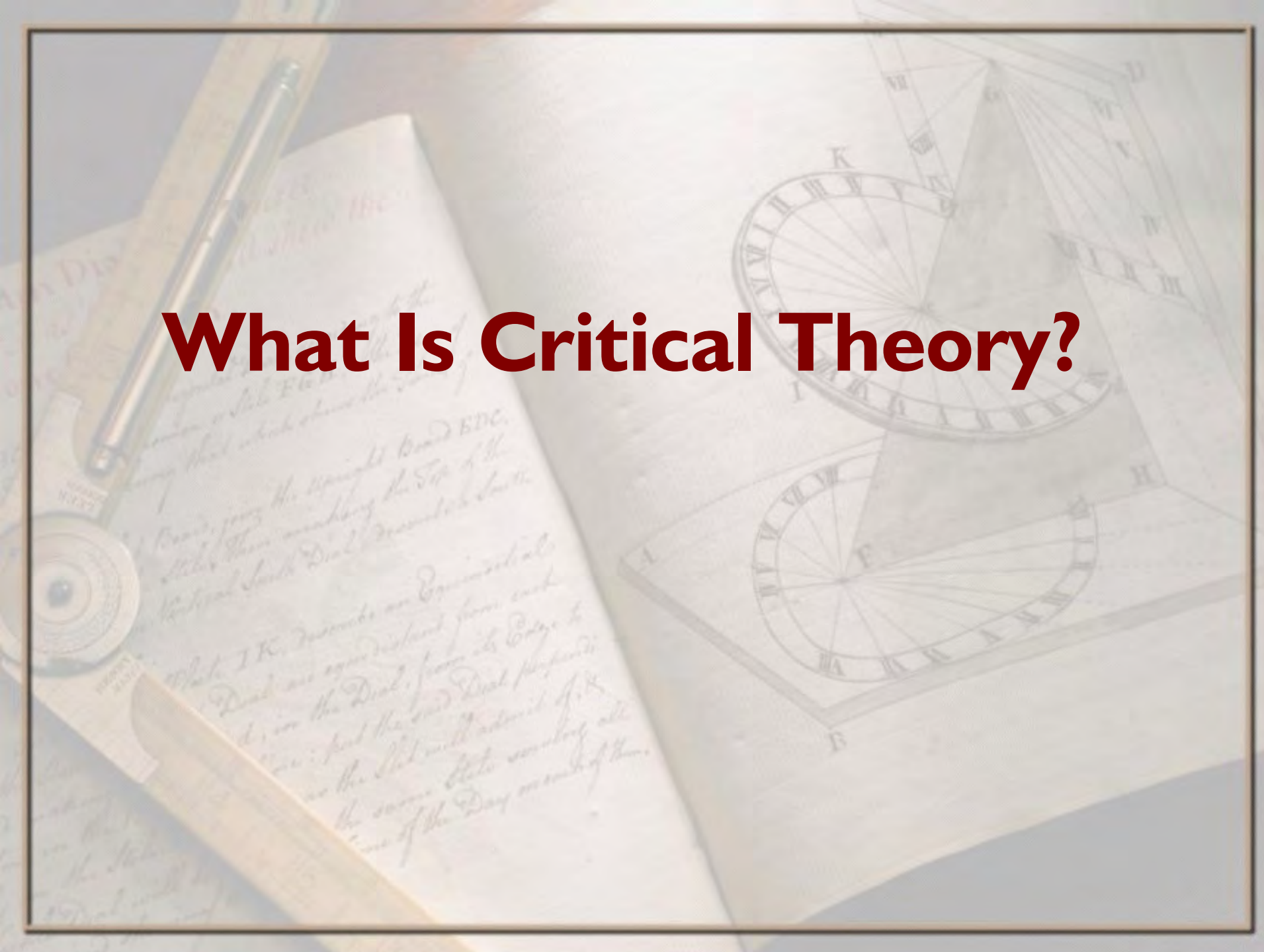
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12 January 2010

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# What Is Critical Theory?



# Criticism and Interpretation

- ★ Criticism is the act analyzing, evaluating, and judging the quality of a literary or artistic work.
- ★ Interpretation is explanation, explication, elucidation.
  - ★ Interpretation is the act of finding meaning in a work of art or literature.
- ★ Hermeneutics is the science of interpretation, originally the Bible, but now broadly defined to art and literature.
  - ★ Hermeneutics is interpretive theory.

# Theory

- ★ “A coherent group of general propositions used as principles of explanation for a class of phenomena” (*Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary*)
- ★ A proposed explanation
- ★ A system of rules, principles, and methods of art, as distinguished from practice
- ★ Theory is the act of contemplating disciplinary systems methodologically.

# Literary Criticism vs Literary Theory

- ★ Literary criticism is a particular act of interpretation of a text.
  - ★ Literary criticism explains the text.
- ★ Literary theory is a hermeneutical method that proposes principles of textual analysis.
  - ★ Literary theory is *the* system that underpins a particular practice of criticism; literary theory systematizes literary criticism.

# Critical Theory

- ★ Critical theory, as opposed to specifically literary theory, embodies the methodological analysis of culture in general. Literary analysis is one component of a larger analysis of media, politics and ideology, socio-economic positions, and other subjectifying apparatuses.
- ★ Because the theories we're learning about can be applied across disciplines (not just interpreting literature), I will refer to them as types of critical theory.

# What We Won't Cover

(Take English 4110 in Fall 2010)

- ★ Psychoanalysis, the analysis of the psyche of the author, text, and culture
- ★ Reader-Response Criticism, the triangular relationships between writers, texts, and readers
- ★ Phenomenology and Existentialism, the analysis of the ontological status and worldly effects of literature

# What We Will Cover

- ★ **New Criticism (and Formalism)**, close reading of the text itself, paying particular heed to its unifying tensions and analysis of internal form.
- ★ **Structuralism (and Semiotics and Narratology)**, the analysis of signs and codes within linguistic systems
- ★ **Post-Structuralism (and Deconstruction and Post-Modernism)**, the analysis of a text's plays, slippages, and aporias of meaning



# What We Will Cover

Continued

- ★ **Marxism (and Cultural Studies), socio-economic historical and cultural analyses**
- ★ **Feminist Criticism and Gender Studies, the analysis of the subject positions of women and gender within texts as well as the status of women authors within the canon**
- ★ **New Historicism, the interplay between literature and history writing**

# What We Will Cover

Concluded

- ★ Postcolonialism, analyses of colonial ideology (oppression and othering) and postcolonial resistance
- ★ Lesbian, Gay, and Queer Theory, analyses of the politics and poetics, consciousness and unconsciousness of (queer) sexuality and identity
- ★ African American Criticism, analyses of African American (literary/aesthetic) history and heritage and the social construction of racial identity



# Russian Formalism And the New Criticism

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# Russian Formalism

- ★ Considers the text to be an autonomous object.
- ★ Studies literary (as opposed to practical or conventional) language and the internal operations of works of literature, be they either narrative form in fiction or sound structure in poetry.
- ★ Literature evolves not because of external history but through revolutions of literary language.

# New Criticism

- ★ Eschews philological, biographical, and historical criticism
- ★ Strives to create an objective, formalist criticism that finds meaning in “the text itself”
- ★ Advocates close reading that analyzes tension and complexity of formal structure and meaning via ambiguity, irony, and paradox
- ★ Resolves tensions of text into harmonious organic unity that engenders a universal theme



# Structuralism and Semiotics

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# Theory

Structuralism is a multidisciplinary endeavor, particularly in the fields of linguistics, anthropology, and literary studies, that seeks to determine how surface phenomena such as linguistic signs, social norms, and literary conventions are tied to an underlying, governing system, which itself corresponds to the organizing systems of the human mind. Structuralism is a human, social science.

# Structure

- ★ A structure is a whole system, complete unto itself with internal regulations that provide stability yet allow for transformation of the system.
- ★ Examples of structures include language or sign systems, mating rituals, and narrative conventions.



# Structural Linguistics

- ★ Founded by Ferdinand de Saussure, structural linguistics theorizes that an arbitrary, relational, and differential system of language mediates the human mind's experience of the world.
- ★ The human mind creates language as a system to organize world.

# Structural Anthropology

- ★ Founded by Claude Lévi-Strauss, structural anthropology looks at the codes of social life.
- ★ Lévi-Strauss in particular looked at cultural myths, called mythemes, that transcend cultures, and therefore suggests a common human experience of, for instance, ritual codes and incest taboos.

# Semiotics

- ★ Semiology is the science of signs.
- ★ Semiotics, as initially practiced by Roland Barthes, is the practice of analyzing sign systems, not just language, but objects, images, and behaviors; therefore, semiotics opens itself up to literary and media studies of film, television, and pop culture.

# Practice

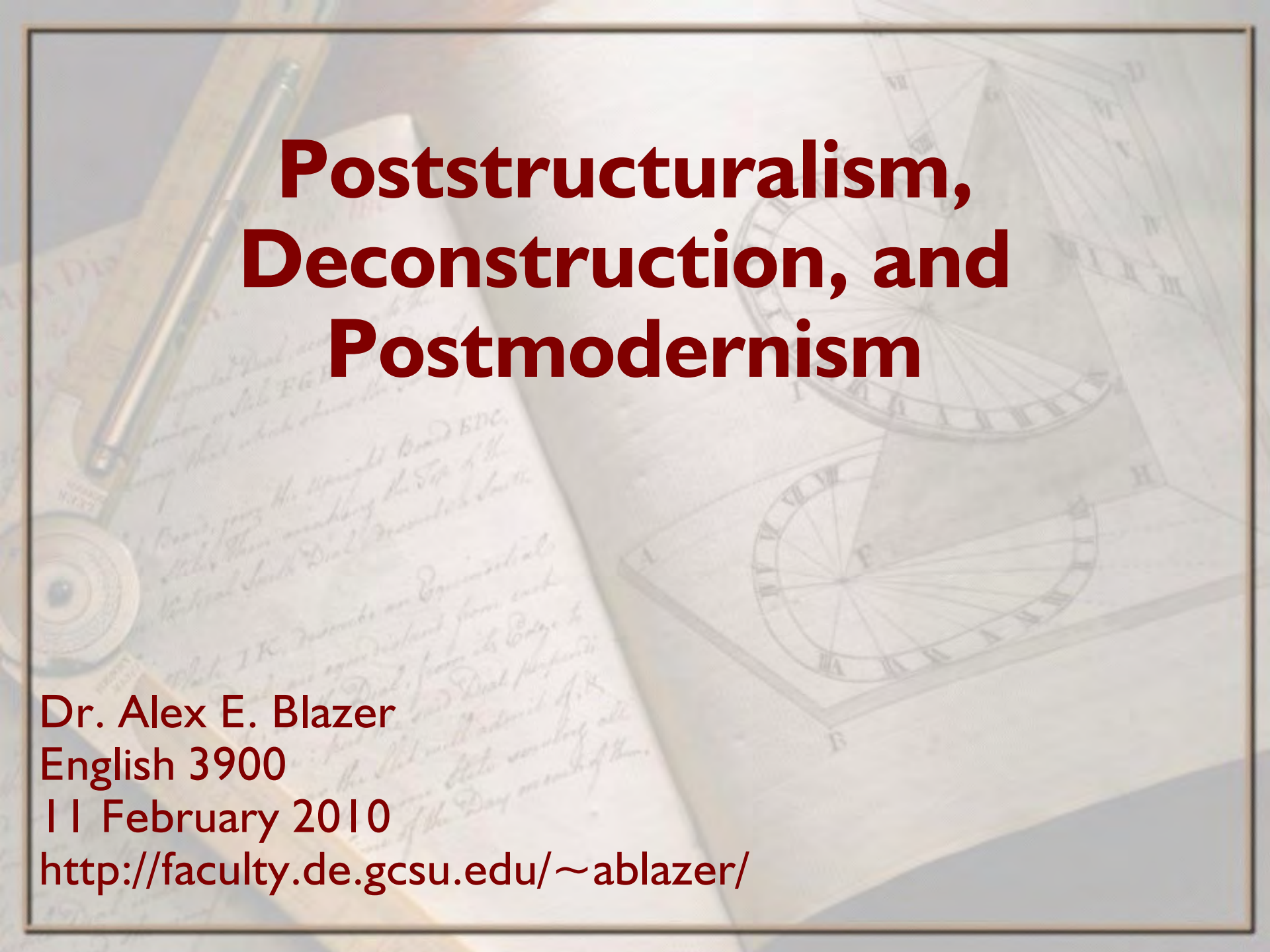
## Comparing the Interpretive Practices

- ★ Whereas New Criticism looks at *what* a text means in terms of the relationship between form and content,
- ★ Structuralist criticism looks at *how* a text means in terms of an underlying system, be it literary writing or reading convention.
- ★ Structuralism does not evaluate meaning or theme, it analyzes the structures that undergird the work and our understanding of it.

# Practice

## Three Versions of Structuralist Criticism

- ★ 1) **Genre Study:** Examines the structure and grammar of literary genres, for example Northrup Frye's archetypes, mythos, and quests.
- ★ 2) **Narratology:** Analyzes the narrative theory of grammar, patterns, and formulas that underlies a literary work.
- ★ 3) **Interpretive Conventions:** Analyzes the codes and conventions of reading and interpreting literature, for example literary competence and interpretive communities.



# Poststructuralism, Deconstruction, and Postmodernism

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# From Structuralism To Poststructuralism

- ★ Whereas structuralism valorized only the underlying system and codes of literature while decidedly excommunicating the writer, the reader, and meaning from the literary process,
- ★ Poststructuralism seeks the destruction of codes, systems, and structures in order to find a place for the writer, the reader, and the meaning of the text.

# Structuralism vs. Poststructuralism

★ Like structuralism, poststructuralism is interdisciplinary. In terms of what we have studied or will study, Lacanian psychoanalysis, deconstruction, and the New Historicism are versions of poststructuralism.



# Structuralism vs. Poststructuralism

- ★ Structuralism and poststructuralism differ in three key areas:
  - ★ The underlying structure,
  - ★ Identity,
  - ★ And literary criticism.

# The Underlying Structure

- ★ Structuralism analyzes the freeze-frame of the underlying system.
- ★ Poststructuralism analyzes *langue* in motion, the social context of codes: unfrozen, in human history, and reintegrated into time.
  - ★ Lacan's metonymy of desire (psychoanalysis)
  - ★ Derrida's différance (deconstruction)
  - ★ Foucault's discontinuous history (New Historicism)

# Identity

- ★ Structuralism discusses the system only, not individual authors and not individual people.
- ★ The author is dead, replaced by myths and archetypes and the structural analysis of narrative.
- ★ The individual is nil, superceded by the discursive system.
- ★ Poststructuralism witnesses the reemergence of the author and individual, but subjected to language systems.
- ★ Lacan's subject exists only in relation to the Big Other
- ★ Derrida's decentered subject of discourse
- ★ Foucault's subject-positions derived from discourse

# Literary Criticism

- ★ Structuralism analyzes how a text means in terms of underlying systems and structure, such as archetypes, genres, and narrative formulas.
- ★ Poststructuralism analyzes the shifting identities of the characters and the purposively playful meaning of the text.

# Poststructuralist Literary Criticism

- ★ Analyze the fluctuating and shifting, non-essential and non-substantial, destabiliz-ed/-ing and performative subject-positions of the characters with respect to the various discursive networks to which they are subject(ed).
- ★ Analyze the paradoxes and the play, the contradictions and the shifts, the undecidability and the aporia of meaning within the text.
- ★ Meaning and “Truth” are suspected, debunked, dispelled, questioned, destabilized, contingent and situated rather than transcendent and absolute.

# Types of Poststructuralism

- ★ Deconstruction is one version of poststructuralism, most associated with Derrida and de Man, that shows the play of meanings within the world and the work.
- ★ Lois Tyson's *Critical Theory Today* and Ross Murfin's "What Is Deconstruction?" focus exclusively on deconstruction and do not discuss the larger theory of poststructuralism. Deconstruction is a subset of poststructuralism; do not confuse one for the other.

# Types of Poststructuralism

Concluded

- ★ New Historicism, which we'll cover separately later) is another subset of poststructuralism, most associated with Foucault and Greenblatt, that shows the play of ideological power within individuals subjected to discourse.
- ★ Other versions of poststructuralism include Baudrillard's hyperreality (the deconstruction of the image vs reality hierarchy) and French feminist Cixous's *écriture féminine* (the play of the text become the pleasure of the body).

# Deconstruction

## Deconstructing Language

- ★ Due to the everyday, practical, and conventional use of language, we think language is a stable structure, but it is actually a slippery, endlessly deferring play of the chain of signifiers that never arrives at the signified, especially in literature.
- ★ Deconstruction thus attends to the ironies and ambiguities valorized by New Criticism, but it does not seek to resolve tensions into an harmonious, universal, meaningful theme.



# Deconstruction

## Deconstructing the World

★ After showing language's instabilities, deconstruction turned to the foundations of being: by deconstructing language, deconstruction disrupts logocentrism, the ground of Western thought. Absolute and transcendental metaphysics give way to decentered and disseminated discourse.

# Deconstruction

## Deconstructing Identity

- ★ Just as language and belief are destabilized, so too is identity. There are neither *a priori* nor innate organizing principles; rather identity is subject to (thus the term “subjectivity”) the decentered, unstable, shifting play of language and discourse systems.
- ★ Deconstruction does not discount structuralism's belief in an underlying system of human thought, but it shows how this system is as playful and prone to slippage as the language/discourse system, which it believes produces subjectivity.

# Deconstruction

## Deconstructing Literature

- ★ Deconstruction either 1) analyzes how the meaning of the text is ultimately undecidable because the conflicts and contradictions within the text produces conflicting and contradictory interpretations (again, this method is the exact opposite of how New Critics seek to expose and then resolve the tensions of the text). . . .

# Deconstruction

## Deconstructing Literature, continued

★Or 2) analyzes how the text paradoxically privileges both terms of the binary oppositions that structures it or, similarly, how the privileged position ceaselessly slips back and forth between terms, without being resolved.

# Deconstructive Theorists

- ★ Friedrich Nietzsche: deconstructive philosopher before there was such a thing as deconstruction
- ★ Jacques Derrida: deconstructive philosophy
- ★ Hélène Cixous: deconstructive feminist philosophy
- ★ Barbara Johnson: deconstructive literary criticism

# Postmodernism

History, Literature, Theory

★ Postmodernism refers to three interrelated concepts:

- ★ The historical era from 1945 to the present
- ★ The broad literary movement that responds to modernism as well as the historical era.
- ★ The philosophy and theory that is used to account for the cultural period and and artistic movement.

# Postmodernity

Historical Era 1945 to the present

- ★ Inaugurated by the Bomb (the Nuclear Age)
- ★ *From world wars to*
  - ★ cold wars (capitalistic democracy vs communistic oligarchy),
  - ★ culture wars (traditional vs progressive world views),
  - ★ wars on drugs and terrorism

# Postmodernity

History, concluded

- ★ *Decline of industry; the rise of*
  - ★ multinational/late capitalism,
  - ★ information (the Information Age),
  - ★ networking (cyberspace), and
  - ★ image consumption (hyperreality)
- ★ Multiculturalism (ideology of diversity) and identity politics (political action groups based on race, gender, sexual orientation, etc)



# Postmodernism

Literary Period from 1960s to the present

- ★ Postmodernism has no crisis of belief in traditional authority, as in modernism.
- ★ Rather, the modernist anxiety has been replaced with a postmodernist, relativistic, absurdist, "anything and everything goes" attitude.
- ★ Postmodernist literature attempts neither to play off of grand narratives nor to search for absolute Truths.
- ★ Instead, it seeks to *either* create little narratives and little truths that result in qualified beliefs, self-conscious themes, and linguistic/literary games *or* portray worlds without meaning.

# Postmodernism

Literature, continued

- ★ Experimentation with form is no longer avant-garde and radical, as in modernism.
- ★ Rather, experimentation with conventional forms is the norm--the convention--in postmodernism.
- ★ As postmodern existence becomes eclectic, laissez faire, and hyperreal,
- ★ Postmodern literature loses linearity and coherence and revels in the open and playful and idiosyncratic mixing of forms, genres, disciplines, and systems all within one work.

# Postmodernism

Literature, concluded

- ★ Postmodernist literature does *not* believe there is a real 'real' to represent, for everything is an image or text, reality is socially constructed by language and culture, and the self is in process.
- ★ Therefore, postmodernist literature is self-reflective, self-reflexive, and self-conscious.
- ★ It often reveals its own artificiality and textuality in various metafictional and intertextual turns.
- ★ Characters are hybridized or fragmented, shifting or multiplicitous, incohesive or inchoate.

# Postmodernism

## Theory

- ★ In the postmodernist world, there remains no modernist lament over the fragmentation of self and world; nor is there a desire to put Humpty Dumpty back together again.
- ★ Rather, postmodernists revel in socially constructed realities and multiplicitous, shifting subjectivities.
- ★ Any self-cohesion is merely a tentative suturing of signification.
- ★ Postmodern literature thematizes the play of *the* self in *a* constant process of sociocultural construction.

# Postmodernism

Theory, continued

- ★ Anti-foundationalist (knowledge based on basic, self-evident, self-justifying beliefs) and anti-positivist (knowledge based on sense experience)
- ★ Critiques the ontological (the reality of metaphysical being) basis of subjectivity and objectivity
- ★ Believes knowledge exists in the process of discourse, thus knowledge is shifting and discourse is power

# Postmodernism

Theory, concluded

- ★ Critiques universality and meta-narratives (Lyotard)
- ★ Signs overtake reality (Baudrillard)



# Marxism and Cultural Studies

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# Marxism

## Theory

Marxism, named after economic, political, and cultural philosopher Karl Marx, is a school of thought that examines how politically endorsed economic systems structure societies (organized communities) and cultures (the beliefs and values of communities).



# Society

According to Marxism, societies are composed of two elements.

- ★ **Base: economics**

- ★ the material modes of production

- ★ **Superstructure: sociopolitical ideology**

- ★ the culture such as education, philosophy, religion, government, arts, and science

# Class

Within a society, people are divided into classes.

- ★ (Socio-)economic class: a group of people categorized by a particular relationship to economic and social power, i.e., its relationship to the base and superstructure
- ★ bourgeoisie: in a capitalist system, those who own and control the base and implement the superstructure
- ★ proletariat: in a capitalist system, those who manage (but neither own nor control) the base and are programmed by the superstructure

# Types of Societies

Marxism predominantly looks at three kinds of societies.

- ★ **Capitalism:** a free-market economic system based on the private ownership of the means of production and distribution of goods
- ★ The bourgeoisie own the capital while the proletariat hire their bodies for wages (wage labor).

# Types of Societies

Continued

- ★ **Socialism:** the stage after the proletarian revolution when a society is changing from capitalism to communism
- ★ The people control the means of production and operate it based on fairness rather than free-market.

# Types of Societies

Concluded

- ★ **Communism:** the political theory in which all property and wealth is owned in a classless society by all the members of a community
- ★ Although the former Soviet Union and the present China and Cuba, for example, call themselves communist, they are oligarchies (government by a small group of people) and dictatorships (government by one ruler).
- ★ Although communism is the goal of Marxism, many, Marxists included, consider it a utopian dream, and instead focus on achieving at least class consciousness in the culture and socialism in the government at best.

# The Dialectical Materialist View of History

- ★ Materialism: focus on the physical and worldly wealth and possessions, based on the belief that the mind follows the body
- ★ History: study of the past and how the past progresses into the present and future

# Dialectical Materialism

Concluded

- ★ Dialectic: the progressive process by which two opposing thoughts, thesis and antithesis, become combined in a unified whole or synthesis
- ★ Dialectical materialism: the historical process by which opposing forces such as the bourgeoisie and the proletariat or the material reality and a culture's consciousness of its material reality perpetually struggle to bring about a justly organized and self-reflective society
- ★ Praxis: method by which theory is put into practice

# Ideology and Consciousness

- ★ Ideology: originally and generically, a belief system brought about by cultural conditioning that portrays arbitrary structures of existence as natural and innate ways of being, such as capitalist ideology or Marxist ideology
- ★ However, after Althusser, the term has come to mean in many instances how the culture blinds an oppressed class to its material conditions of existence by erecting an illusion; common ideologies that operate in the service of American capitalism and those who hold power under capitalism are the American dream, patriotism, religion, individualism, consumerism.



# Ideology and Consciousness

Continued

- ★ Alienation: originally from Marx, meaning the estrangement from one's own labor
- ★ However, the term now also suggests the estrangement from self and society, and the feeling of not belonging and subsequent withdrawal from the world.

# Ideology and Consciousness

Continued

- ★ **Commodification:** treating objects and people for their economic or social status rather than for their aesthetic or human value
- ★ **Commodification of Desire:** humanity's wants and needs become entangled in conspicuous consumption and commodity fetish such that the ruling class does not need to physically oppress the classes that are under them if those classes purposefully sacrifice themselves as wage-slaves in order to acquire the stuff that the ideology programmed them to fixate on

# Ideology and Consciousness

Concluded

- ★ **Class consciousness:** awareness of the (alienating and commodified) socioeconomic conditions of one's class
- ★ **False consciousness:** the lack of awareness or ideological illusions of one's conditions of existence

# The Goal of Marxism

The goal of Marxist theory is to use a dialectical materialist view of history to reveal the ideologically constructed false consciousness of the alienated and commodified classes (both bourgeoisie and proletariat, or upper- middle-, and lowerclasses) in order that the socioeconomic conditions of existence be changed toward communist ends.

# Marxist Literary Criticism

Whereas New Critics closely read the text to find its universal theme...While structuralist critics examine the structure of literary genres, the grammar of narrative patterns, or the literary conventions of reading...Whereas poststructuralist critics revel in the shifting, paradoxical, and playful meanings of the work,...

Marxist literary critics approach a text in two ways, which can be applied singularly or simultaneously.

# Marxist Literary Criticism

Continued

- ★ The Marxist critic looks “inside” the content of the text (for example, at the character and plot) for issues, ideas, and themes relating to the materialist history of capitalist socioeconomic class struggle.
- ★ The critic interprets how the work of literature *either* exposes and challenges *or* manifests and reifies class ideology.

# Marxist Literary Criticism

Concluded

- ★ The Marxist critic looks “outside” the text at the level of form (at the genre, period, or movement of the work) and oftentimes at general types of texts, to determine how the class of text derives from and/or reifies its society’s dominant mode of production and/or superstructure.
- ★ First, the critic evaluates whether the form employs realism or experimentation, and then she evaluates whether the realist or experimental form serves ideological or revolutionary ends.

# Marxism

## Theorists

- ★ G. W. F. Hegel
- ★ Karl Marx
- ★ Antonio Gramsci
- ★ Louis Althusser [ALT-whos-sair]
- ★ Pierre Macherey



# Cultural Studies

## Theory

★Akin to the poststructuralist version of Marxism as represented by Louis Althusser, cultural criticism examines the underlying ideology of culture. Unlike classical Marxism which is interested in the conflict between the capitalists and the proletariat, cultural studies focuses on the tension between high/superior and low/inferior culture, an opposition blurred by popular culture, and uses Marxism, feminism, and other political theories to advocate for the oppressed.

# Cultural Studies

## Criticism

- ★ Cultural criticism examines the enculturated behavior and value systems as well as the social structures and social understanding invoked by the literary work in not only its characters but also its readers; and it often looks at the experience of the culturally marginalized.

# Cultural Studies

## Theorists

- ★ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno
- ★ John Fiske
- ★ Dick Hebdige



# Feminism and Feminist Literary Criticism

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# Theory

While New Criticism closely reads the organic unity that composes the universal theme of the text, while structuralism looks at underlying structures over against particular texts, while poststructuralism is interested in the infinite contradiction and play of the text, and while Marxism looks at the relationship between socioeconomic reality and ideology in advance of productive and conscious change, feminism criticizes patriarchal ideology and advocates women's shared creative and communal valorization.

# Patriarchy

★ Patriarchal ideology blinds both women and men to the unequal yet equally debilitating socially constructed realities of gendered experience that not only conserve male power but also oppress, objectify, and other women through traditional, hierarchical, and binary gender roles.

# Feminism(s)

★ While all feminists believe that 1) women are oppressed and 2) othered by 3) patriarchy, which is ensconced--established and concealed--in Western civilization, that 4) culture determines gender, and that 5) literature portrays gender issues, and while all feminists 6) act for gender equality, different feminists focus on different aspects and assert different causes of gender disparity.

# Materialist Feminism

★ Like Marxism, materialist feminism looks at consciousness constructed from life, reality. While Marxism focuses on class struggle, materialist feminism analyzes how division of labor within the family leads to woman being othered locally by the family and culturally by the patriarchal institutions, with no shared collective experience, history, or tradition, their bodies objectified and their labor appropriated.



# Psychoanalytic Feminism

- ★ Psychoanalytic feminism theorizes the relationship between the symbolic order of language and psychosexual existence. Psychoanalytic feminism looks more specifically, patriarchal binary thought and phallogocentrism, and the male gaze. *Écriture féminine*, overbrimming with vibrant, fluid meaning and originating in the semiotic self, breaks the boundaries of the social machine by virtue of being outside the predetermined binary oppositions of symbolic (male) logic.

# Multicultural Feminism

★ While materialist feminism focuses on the patriarchal conditions of living and psychoanalytic feminism on the phallogocentric psyche, multicultural feminism charts the intersection of race, class, sexual orientation, and other cultural factors.

# Gender Studies

★ Though technically not feminism because it does not advocate political change, gender studies' deconstruction of the fixed, binary, hierarchical gender oppositions (male/female, sex/gender) reveals a performative and decentered fluidity of gender identity and sexuality that coincides with feminist readings and goals.

# Feminist Literary Criticism

★ Just as Marxist literary criticism analyzes how the work reinforces or resists capitalist ideology, feminist literary criticism examines how the text reifies or undermines patriarchal ideological operations, how it creates or portrays a female community, how it encompasses an intersection of forces (race, class, etc) acting on gender, how it portrays or establishes women's creativity, consciousness, and literary tradition, how its style of writing is gendered, and how it is received or rejected by its culture based on gender issues.

The background features a faded historical illustration of a sundial on the right, showing a gnomon and a circular dial face with Roman numerals. On the left, there is a scroll with handwritten text in cursive, partially obscured by a wooden ruler and a quill pen. The overall theme is historical and scholarly.

# New Historicism

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# Poststructuralism

## Theory Redux

- ★ As previously discussed, poststructuralism seeks the destruction of codes, systems, and structures in order to find a place for the writer, the reader, and the meaning of the text in reaction to structuralism's reductive and totalizing classification.
- ★ Lacanian psychoanalysis, deconstruction, and New Historicism are versions of poststructuralism.

# Poststructuralism

## Literary Criticism Redux

- ★ Analyze the fluctuating and shifting, non-essential and non-substantial, destabiliz-ed/-ing and performative subject-positions of the characters with respect to the various discursive networks to which they are subject(ed).
- ★ Analyze the paradoxes and the play, the contradictions and the shifts, the undecidability and the aporia of meaning within the text.
- ★ Meaning and “Truth” are suspected, debunked, dispelled, questioned, destabilized, contingent and situated rather than transcendent and absolute.

# From Deconstruction to New Historicism

★ While deconstruction reveals the ideological contradictions of the text through both the necessarily free play of language and the inevitably self-deconstructing binary oppositions, New Historicism focuses on the ideological conflicts of the text through discontinuous, discursive history.



# New Historicism

## Theory

★ Unlike traditional historical study, New Historicism does not believe objective analysis of linear, causal, progressive history is possible; rather history is a discontinuous narrative--filled with competing discourses and ideologies--that is interpreted by the current culture to fulfill ideological needs.

# New Historicism

## Literary Criticism

- ★ New Historicism interprets the the literary text as a cultural artifact that embodies the conflicted discourses and opposing ideologies of its time. The critic not only incorporates into her analysis the documented conversations of the time but also exposes their ideological concerns--as well as her own position within history.

# Cultural Criticism

## Theory

★ Recall that we discussed cultural criticism as a theoretical cousin of Marxism and called it Cultural Studies. Theorists who think of Cultural Studies as political often pair it with Marxism; those who conceive of it as cultural pair it with New Historicism; many Cultural Studies theorists themselves define it as its own theory. Although I associate Cultural Studies with Marxism, you should decide for yourself if you conceptualize cultural criticism as a corollary of New Criticism.

# Cultural Criticism

Continued

★Akin to the poststructuralist version of Marxism as represented by Louis Althusser, cultural criticism examines the underlying ideology of culture. Unlike classical Marxism which is interested in the conflict between the capitalists and the proletariat, cultural studies focuses on the tension between high/superior and low/inferior culture, an opposition blurred by popular culture, and uses Marxism, feminism, and other political theories to advocate for the oppressed.

# Cultural Criticism

## Literary Criticism

- ★ Cultural criticism examines the enculturated behavior and value systems as well as the social structures and social understanding invoked by the literary work in not only its characters but also its readers; and it often looks at the experience of the culturally marginalized.



# Postcolonialism

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# Postcolonialism

## Theory

★ Postcolonialism brings together Marxism's concept of ideology, feminism's idea of woman as othered by patriarchal culture, and New Historicism and Cultural Studies' approach to cultural discourse to show how colonial cultures not only have been subjugated by imperialist discourse but also have been interpellated by the colonizers' ideology that alienates, others, and ultimately unhomes and hybridizes their sense of self--even after political imperialism has ceased.

# Colonized Peoples

- ★ While Marxism emphasizes class conflict between those in power and those who aren't, and feminism illustrates patriarchal power, postcolonialism focuses on how colonized people are economically, politically, and culturally dominated (aka, cultural imperialism) such that they no longer feel at home in their native land and often have to give up their mother tongue (and much of their cultural heritage) upon being forced to use the colonizers' language. Colonial subjects have been interpellated by colonial ideology to unconsciously yet nonetheless willingly subjugate themselves because they now conceive of themselves as inferior to the colonizers, an other rather than a self.



# Colonized Peoples

Continued

★ The First World refers to Britain, Europe, and the United States; Second World to white Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa; Third World to developing nations in India, Africa, and South America, and Asia; and Fourth World to indigenous populations like Australian aborigines and Native Americans surrounded by white nations. Postcolonialism looks at Third and Fourth World populations politically and culturally imperialized by First and Second World nations.

# Postcolonialism

## Literature

★ Postcolonial literature explores the natives' encounter with the colonizers, the outsiders' journey into the native wilderness, colonial othering and oppression, political liberation and self-definition, and the reconstruction of native cultural identity and/or the construction of cultural hybridity (of the native and imperialist cultures).

# Postcolonialism

## Literary Criticism

★ Just as Marxism raises class consciousness and advocates for economic justice by questioning if the work of literature critiques or indulges in capitalist ideology, postcolonial literary criticism raises colonial consciousness and asks if the work of literature participates in colonial or anticolonial ideology. Does the work of literature portray colonial oppression, identity, and resistance? Does it condone or criticize othering?



# Lesbian, Gay, and Queer Criticism

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# Theory

## General

★ Just as feminism, Marxism, and postcolonialism looks at the status of women, workers, and colonial subjects under the patriarchy, capitalism, and (post)colonialism, respectively, lesbian, gay, and queer theory examines the standing of lesbian, gay, and nonstraight people in homophobic, heterosexist, and/or heteronormative society, in other words, in a culture where fear and/or institutional othering of gays is the ideological and compulsory norm.

# Lesbian Criticism

## Theory

★ Like feminist criticism, lesbian criticism advocates for the political and literary empowerment of women--and lesbians--over against patriarchal and heterosexist power. A lesbian can be defined on a continuum from sexual desire for women, on the one hand, to identification with women, on the other.

# Lesbian Criticism

Continued

- ★ Lesbian literary critics analyze I) the lesbian subtextual coding of supposedly straight stories, II) the work of lesbian authors, III) female homosociality or women-identified women in heterosexual texts, and IV) the lesbian literary tradition.

# Gay Criticism

★ Just as lesbianism is defined on a continuum, so too gay. While lesbianism looks at either the axis of sexuality or the axis of homosociality, gay criticism examines either the axis of sexuality or the axis of culture via the gay sensibility, existing outside the mainstream culture, for instance, through campy artifice and theatricality.



# Gay Criticism

Continued

- ★ Like lesbian criticism, gay criticism also interprets gay poetics, gay coding of straight texts, the gay literary tradition, the gay sensibility in literature, sexual/gender politics, and heterosexual/-ist ideology.

# Queer Theory

- ★ Just as gender studies theorizes a continuum of gender constructions beyond the traditional two, and just as deconstruction dismantles the hierarchical binary oppositions (male/female, masculine/feminine, presence/absence), queer theory deconstructs the heterosexual/homosexual opposition to show how sexuality is not only unstable and fluid but also subject to shifting social constructions. Queer theory looks at sexuality that transgresses the typical hetero-/homo- poles.

# African American Criticism

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# Theory

## General

★ Just as feminism, Marxism, postcolonialism, and queer theory look at the status of women, workers, colonial subjects, and nonstraights under patriarchy, capitalism, (post)colonialism, and compulsory heterosexuality respectively, African American studies examines the standing of African Americans and people of color in a cultural hegemony of white, Eurocentric America.

# Theory

## Continued

★ African American studies examines racism springing from unequal power relations, internalized racism of people of color that results from ideological programming, intra-racial racism with the African American community regarding skin shade, W. E. B. DuBoi's idea double consciousness from being both American and African American.

# Theory

Concluded

- ★ There is a debate between creating new theories for African American community and literature (like the Black Arts Movement) on the one hand, and adapting traditional white, European theories (like we've been studying) to black culture.

# Critical Race Theory

- ★ Critical Race Theory believes that racism exists in everyday occurrences and, following Marxism, is the materialist deterministic result of the convergence of class, race, gender, sexuality, politics, and religion.
- ★ Moreover, just as poststructuralism believes that identity is constructed by multifarious discourses, critical race theory conceives of race as a social construction rather than a biological given. As society changes, so to does the way the races are differentiated. Finally, critical race theorists believe that minorities are in a better subject position to talk about racism because they experience it directly.

# African American Literary Criticism

★ Like the other theories based on identity politics we've discussed, African American literary criticism is interested in African American literary history and poetics as well as subjects specific to African Americans like slavery, the Middle Passage, Civil War, Reconstruction, and the Northern migration and genres particular to African American writers like the tall tale; oral, folk and signifying literature; and the blues.



# African American

Literary Criticism, concluded

- ★ Black women create a special brand of literary criticism interested in the status of African American women's identity and status that is partially feminist and partially African American.
- ★ Finally, African American literary critics differentiate between the stereotypical American identity created in American literary tradition and the stereotypical Africanist identity created in American literary tradition.