

## **Literary Criticism Research Paper – 250 points**

What is it? There are many different critical approaches to literature (or “schools of critical thought”). The goal of all of these types of criticism is to help readers explore a work of literature more deeply and to appreciate it as a “multilayered construct of meaning;” as a result of literary criticism, readers are able to recognize the “social and cultural implications” of a work (Kaston et al).

**What are the types of literary criticism?** There are numerous forms; however, the ones we will be relating to *Hamlet* are:

- Formalist
- New Historicism
- Psychoanalytic
- Feminist
- Mythological/Jungian

**What is the assignment?** You will choose one type of literary criticism to focus on for your research paper; your thesis and type of research will vary dramatically based on the school of literary thought that you select.

After gathering sources, you will move quickly through the research process gathering data both from the play and outside research and writing your 6-7 page (***not including*** Works Cited page) final draft.

**The due date is December 10, 2014; your paper must be turned in electronically to Turnitin.com by 11:50 pm.**

**Everything will be done in MLA format!**

- If you need help with this assignment, please set up a time to meet with me *as soon as possible*. Do not wait until the last minute to request help!

### **Literary Criticism #1: Formalism**

- Formalists focus on the structure (or FORM), of the literary work. Formalism is the type of criticism on which the AP Literature exam focuses. Formalists are much more interested in the use of language than the content (i.e., they study the use of language and how it creates meaning).
- Formalists try to be objective in their analysis and disregard external issues that others often take into consideration when studying literature - such as the history and politics of the time when the work was written.
- Formalists believe that great writers move beyond boring everyday speech to use language in a creative, unexpected way that causes the reader to think differently about life. They study the literary elements and interesting patterns of language that a writer uses.
- Formalists believe that a work of literature is an art form in itself, and it is not symbolic of the author's or society's beliefs.

#### **Questions:**

1. How does Hamlet's *language* change during the course of the soliloquies, and what does this reveal about his state of mind? (Examine the first soliloquy and compare it to later soliloquies).
2. Why does Hamlet choose to use puns with certain characters and double entendres with others? What does this illustrate about his morals and goals?
3. There are many examples of repetition and echoing in the play (i.e., the ghost echoing Hamlet's earlier words, Hamlet repeating Gertrude's lines but putting his own twist on them, and the repeated mentioning of ears and acting terminology). Choose one or more of these to explore in detail. What is the purpose of this?

## **Literary Criticism #2: New Historicism**

- New Historicism emerged in the 1980's as a response to formalism. Although new historicists acknowledge the importance of literary elements in writing, they believe it is just as important to examine what was going on in the world when the literary work was written.
- Whereas Historical criticism (in the 1930s and 1940s) was very objective and fact-oriented, new historicists believe that history is less clear-cut. They acknowledge that we have been conditioned by our own society to believe specific things about the past, so our historical reading of a text is always a bit skewed. However, they still think it is important to read a work in the context of its own society.
- Many new historicists utilize the ideas of the French philosopher historian, Michel Foucault, who believed that no historical event had only one cause. Instead, Foucault stated that each event in history was caused by the interaction of factors stemming from politics, economy, and social beliefs of the time.

### **Questions:**

1. What was going on in the Royal family during Shakespeare's time? Does his depiction of Claudius and Gertrude relate in any way to corruption he witnessed first-hand?
2. How did Shakespeare's society view marriages that we deem "incestuous" today? Modern readers can understand why Hamlet is so disgusted by his mother's marriage to Claudius, but would readers during Shakespeare's time think he was overreacting?
3. How was mental illness viewed and treated during the Renaissance? What would the likely response be to Hamlet and Ophelia's "madness," and did the characters in the play respond in the "proper" way, according to their society?

### **Literary Criticism #3: Psychoanalytic (aka Freudian)**

#### ***Type A:***

- Reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. The reader examines conflicts, characters, dream sequences, and symbols.
- The Oedipus complex may operate on a subconscious level for one or more characters (i.e., the father and son compete for the mother's attention).
- Characters' personalities are affected by the three parts of the subconscious:
  - *Id* – Known as the “inner child,” the id is the basic desire for what each person wants. There is no sense of conscience in it. For instance, most of us know that even if we really *want* the delicious-looking lunch the stranger at the next table ordered, we can't just take it from him and eat it ourselves. Someone who is controlled by his or her id, however, would do just that.
  - *Superego* – The opposite of the id, the superego contains our sense of guilt and knowledge of societal expectations. We gain the superego by having our parents and other members in society scold or criticize us.
  - *Ego* – The balance between the id and superego, the ego represents reality. It takes the desires of the id, filters them through the superego, and comes up with an action that satisfies both. The ego realizes that the id must be satisfied, but that there are socially accepted ways to achieve satisfaction.
- If a character's subconscious is unbalanced and favors either the id or the superego, their behavior may be deemed as inappropriate by his or her society.

#### ***Type B:***

- An important relationship exists between the author and the work itself. To understand a work of literature, the reader must understand the author's life and beliefs. Not all works are autobiographical, but psychoanalysts feel that there is always *something* of the author in a text.
- Authors often satirize or mock people they dislike, or are sympathetic to people they do like.

- Readers can infer the author's beliefs by reading a text, or may utilize what is already known about the author's life by using it to understand a work.
- A writer may put his or her repressed desires in the work through the actions performed by the characters. For instance, an author who depicts all lower-class characters as foolish, weak, and disloyal may be expressing repressed discriminatory beliefs towards the poor.

**Questions:**

1. Examine how the subconscious of Hamlet, Fortinbras, and Laertes make them foils for one another. Which part of the subconscious leads each character? Explain.

2. What was happening in Shakespeare's own life during or before he wrote *Hamlet*? What grief of his own might he have been expressing through his play? Explain.

3. Contrast the outcomes of a few major characters (i.e., Hamlet and Claudius). Did they get what they deserved? Did they achieve their goals? What might this reveal about Shakespeare's own beliefs?

### **Literary Criticism #4: Feminist**

- The feminist theory of literary criticism emerged in the 1960's, and it is based on the concept that the Western world has been traditionally patriarchal (created by men, ruled by men, and judged by men). As a result, feminists believe that most literature reflects a masculine bias and presents an inaccurate and sometimes harmful view of women.
- Feminist critics may try to find suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes about women) within literature and expose them. Readers can do this by studying how female characters are portrayed or by examining the patriarchal ideas or male dominance that is shown in a classic work of literature.
- Feminist critics sometimes also examine how the men are portrayed – are male characters shown in a stereotypical way, or do they break out of the traditionally male label?
- The feminist school of thought examines the power relationships and struggles between men and women in literature and explores how male and female characters interact in their relationships.
- Feminist critics believe that the female personality must be judged by different measures than the male personality. In other words, a characteristic such as “strength” manifests itself differently in males than females.

#### **Questions:**

1. Do Gertrude and/or Ophelia have any power in *Hamlet*? If so, is it political, economic, social, or psychological? Explain. Do they serve important functions in the plot or not?
2. In what acts of rebellion, if any, do Ophelia and Gertrude participate? What are the results for each of them when they rebel? What does this reveal about Shakespeare's, or his society's, views about women?
3. Do Gertrude and/or Ophelia have options within their society? How were women viewed and treated during Shakespeare's time? How does this impact how they “should” be acting towards Polonius, Claudius, Hamlet, etc.?

### **Literary Criticism #5: Mythological (aka Archetypal)**

- Sigmund Freud's student, Carl Jung, defined an archetype as "a figure...that repeats itself in the course of history wherever creative fantasy is fully manifested." He believed that all people are born with an understanding of certain archetypes. Archetypes exist in literature in the form of common types of characters (i.e., "the corrupt leader"), situations (i.e., "the epic journey"), and images or symbols (i.e., water as a symbol for purification).
- Similarly, many myths are repeated throughout history and across cultures (such as the origin of life, what happens after death, etc.).
- When authors utilize myths or archetypes, they allow readers to connect with a character or plot with little or no explanation. For instance, writers frequently use archetypes as minor characters because then they do not need to provide as many details about them.
- Mythological or archetypal literary critics look for symbols in the work. It can be just as significant if a symbol in a work seems to represent something other than its typical archetypal meaning (i.e., what if water represented corruption rather than purification?).
- These critics also search for archetypal characters. Common types include the hero, the scapegoat, the outcast, the temptress, and the intellect. Critics then determine whether or not a character fits neatly into the archetype and, if not, they explore why this may be the case.
- Finally, mythological critics identify archetypal situations in a literary work. These include: the quest, the renewal of life, initiation/rites of passage, loss of innocence, and redemptive sacrifice. Critics then discuss the significance of this situation in the context of the work.

**Questions:**

1. Is Hamlet an archetypal hero? If not, why does Fortinbras order a hero's burial for him at the end of the play?
2. Some mythological critics view Claudius and Gertrude as a distorted version of Adam and Eve. Why might this be the case? Do you agree or disagree?
3. How is the natural world (i.e., gardens, flowers, etc.) used as a symbol in the play? Does this correspond to its archetypal symbolic meaning or not? Explain.

**All information presented can be found from these sources:**

"Critical Approaches." *Bedford St. Martin's VirtualLit Interactive Poetry Tutorial*. Updated 2008. [http://  
http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/virtualit/poetry/critical\\_define/crit\\_pscho.h  
tml](http://http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/virtualit/poetry/critical_define/crit_pscho.html).

Grudzina, Douglas. *Teaching William Shakespeare's Hamlet from Multiple Critical Perspectives*. Clayton, DE: Prestwick House, 2006.