Everything we hear is an opinion, not a fact. Everything we see is a perspective, not the truth.

-Marcus Aurelius
What is Literary Criticism?

• Literary criticism refers to the various critical lenses used to analyze literature.

• Each lens is sensitive to point of view, symbol, tone, irony, and other literary techniques, but each also casts those elements in a special light.

• Each lens raises its own types of questions and issues, and, therefore, each approach has its advantages and disadvantages; what is left out of an interpretation is as significant as what is included.
Formalist Criticism

- Formalist Critics (or New Critics) focus on the **formal elements of a work**—its *language, structure, and tone*; they offer intense examinations of the relationship between form and meaning within a work, emphasizing the subtle complexity of how a work is arranged.
  - i.e.: how such things as diction, irony, paradox, metaphor, symbolism, plot, characterization, or narrative technique develop the overall meaning of the piece.

A formalist reads literature as an **independent** work of art rather than as a reflection of the author’s state of mind or as a representation of a moment in history. Such things as biography, history, politics, and economics, for example, are considered far less important than the writing’s form.
Biographical Criticism

• Biographical Criticism is based on the opinion that a knowledge of an author’s life can help readers understand his or her work more fully. Events in a work might follow actual events in a writer’s life just as characters might be based on people known to the author.

• Sometimes biographical information does not change our understanding so much as it enriches our appreciation of a work.

**Warning:** It is worth noting that biographical information can complicate a work or tempt readers to unwisely shape a work’s meaning—or an author’s commentary on his or her own life—upon the latter.
Theories Historical Criticism: Literary Historians

- Literary historians move beyond both the facts of an author’s personal life and the text itself to the social and intellectual currents in which the author composed the work.
- They place the work in the context of its time, and sometimes make connections with other literary works that may have influenced the author.
- The basic strategy of literary historians is to illuminate the historic background in order to shed light on some aspect of the work itself.
Theories Historical Criticism: New Historicism

Criticism

- Emphasizes the interaction between the historic context of a work and a modern reader’s understanding and interpretation of the work.

- New historicists attempt to read a period in all its dimensions, including political, economic, social, and aesthetic concerns.
  - In contrast to traditional literary historians, new historicists attempt to describe the culture of a period by reading many different kinds of texts that traditional literary historians might have previously left for economists, sociologists, and anthropologists.

- They remind us there is not only one historic context for a piece of literature and that history is colored by being reconstructed from our own present moment, which affects our reading of a text.
Theories Historical Criticism: Marxist Criticism

• Developed from the heightened interest in radical reform during the 1930s, when many critics looked to literature as a means of furthering proletarian social and economic goals, based largely on the writings of Karl Marx.

• Focus on the ideological content of a work—its explicit and implicit assumptions and values about matters such as culture, race, class, and power.

• Focus more attention to the content and themes of literature than to its form.

• Aim to reveal and clarify ideological issues, as well as to correct social injustices.

• Some Marxist critics have used literature to describe the competing socioeconomic interests that too often advance capitalist money and power rather than socialist morality and justice.
Theories Historical Criticism: Cultural Criticism

- Like new historicism, cultural criticism focuses on the historical contexts of a literary work, but it also pays particular attention to how a text is influenced by the “pop-culture” of its day.

Postcolonial Criticism

- This subcategory of cultural criticism refers to the analysis of literary works written by writers from countries and cultures that at one time were controlled by colonizing powers—such as Indian writers during or after British colonial rule. The term also refers to the analysis of literary works written about colonial cultures by writers from the colonizing country.
Psychological Criticism

Exploring text through the human psyche

• Psychological criticism draws on Sigmund Freud’s theories and other psychoanalytical theories to understand more fully the text, the writer, and the reader.

• Critics use such approaches to explore the motivations of characters and the symbolic meaning of events. It is a theory based heavily on the idea of the existence of a human unconscious—those impulses, desires, and feelings that a person is unaware of but that influence emotions and behaviors.
Psychological Criticism: Sigmund Freud?

- From Austria
- Revolutionized ideas on how the human mind works
- Very controversial for his time
- Theory: unconscious motives control behavior

Psychologist Sigmund Freud is best known for his ideas concerning dreams, unconscious desires, and sexual repression, as well as his terms for different aspects of the psyche—the id, the ego, and the superego.

- One of the world’s most influential thinkers
- Affected the areas of psychology, medicine, literature, and art
**Psychological Criticism: Parent Relationships**

- Freud says we go through this phase as a child
  - **Oedipus Complex**: A son’s unconscious resentment toward and rivalry with his father for his mother’s love. He unconsciously wants to eliminate his father in order to take his father’s place with his mother.
  - **Electra Complex**: A daughter’s unconscious resentment toward and rivalry with her mother for her father’s love.
  - This is a normal phase for children to go through; it prepares us for adult relationships with the opposite sex.
Psychological Criticism: Conscious vs. Unconscious Mind

**Conscious Mind**—includes everything we are aware of
- Rational thinking
- Memories that we can access when we want to

**Unconscious Mind**—a reservoir of feelings, thoughts, and memories outside of our conscious awareness
- Suppressed memories
- Unconscious mind influences us even though we are unaware
Psychological Criticism:

Elements of Personality

- Personality is composed of three elements:
  - The Id
  - The Ego
  - The Superego

- These elements work together to create the complexity of human behaviors.
Psychological Criticism:

Elements of Personality

**ID**
- Present from birth
- Entirely unconscious
- Instincts
- “Pleasure Principle” – strives for immediate gratification of all desires, wants, and needs
- Important early in life for survival

**EGO**
- Deals with reality
- Ensures that impulsive behaviors from the id are expressed appropriately
- Acts like a filter to keep wants and desires in check

**SUPEREGO**
- Holds our moral standards
  Shaped and influenced by parents and society
- Begins to emerge around age 5
- Perfects and civilizes our behavior
Psychological Criticism: Balancing the Mind

• Balance between the id, the ego, and the superego is key to a healthy personality.

• What might happen if an adult’s id was stronger than the ego or superego?

• What might happen if an adult’s superego suppressed the id completely?
Gender Criticism

- Explores how ideas about men and women—what is *masculine* and *feminine*—can be regarded as *socially constructed* by particular cultures.

- Gender criticism expands categories and definitions of what is masculine or feminine and tends to regard sexuality as more complex than merely masculine or feminine, heterosexual or homosexual.

- Includes:
  - Feminist Criticism
  - Gay and Lesbian Criticism
Mythological Criticism

- Mythological critics look for **underlying, recurrent patterns** in literature that reveal **universal meanings and basic human experiences** for readers regardless of when or where they live.

- Mythological critics examine the elements of a work to make larger connections that explain the work’s lasting appeal.

**Archetypes**—universal symbols that evoke deep and perhaps unconscious responses in a reader because archetypes bring with them our hopes and fears since the beginning of time.
Mythological Criticism: Common Archetypes

- **Archetypes** - universal symbols that evoke deep and perhaps unconscious responses in a reader because archetypes bring with them our hopes and fears since the beginning of time.

Note: How to Read Literature Like a Professor is a great resource for common literary archetypes.
Reader-Response Criticism

- **Focuses its attention on the reader rather than the work itself.** This approach to literature describes what goes on in the reader’s mind during the process of reading a text.

- **Aim to describe the reader’s experience of a work; in effect we get a reading of the reader, who comes to the work with certain expectations and assumptions, which are either met or not met.** Hence the consciousness of the reader-produced by reading the work-is the subject of the criticism.

- **Does not view a text as a finished product with fixed formal properties.** Instead, the text is an evolving creation of the reader as he or she processes the elements of the text. Therefore, there is no single definitive reading of the work, even for an individual reader.

- **By imagining different readers, we can imagine a variety of responses to the story that are influenced by the readers’ own impressions, memories, or experiences.**
Deconstructionism

- Highly controversial
- Seeks to destabilize meaning instead of establishing it
  - Looks for contradictions in meaning within the text
  - Focus on the gaps and ambiguities that reveal a text’s instability
  - Primarily interested in how the use of language—diction, tone, symbol, and so on—yields only provisional, not definitive, meaning.
Now It’s Your Turn!!!

In your groups, you will be analyzing Kate Chopin’s *The Story of an Hour* through the lens of one of the forms of literary criticism we have been discussing. Here is the assignment:

- Do a close read/annotation through your assigned lens.
- Complete a group response of no less than 10 sentences in which identify and support your claim using textual evidence. Quality counts!!
- Share out to the Class—Remember, you are the experts so wow us!

**Critical Lenses**

- Formalist
- Biographical
- Historical
  - Literary Historical
  - New Historicism
  - Marxist
  - Cultural
- Psychological
- Gender
- Mythological
- Reader-Response
- Deconstructionist