

## Contemporary Literary Theory & Criticism

The field of literary theory and criticism is vast and encompasses many different classical and modern literary traditions across the world. The MA exam, however, focuses primarily on contemporary Western theory and criticism. This reading list is therefore intended to provide a broad understanding of the major models of contemporary theory and criticism through a selection of representative authors/texts. By way of providing a historical background and context to these contemporary theories, the reading list includes a small selection of foundational texts/authors from the Classical and Romantic periods. In addition, the list incorporates a guide that illustrates how each theoretical model can be applied to analyze and interpret literary works.

### Readings

#### Required

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all readings are provided as excerpts in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Material not in Norton will be provided as links or pdfs in a password protected area, e.g., Canvas.
2. Lois Tyson's *Critical Theory Today: a User-Friendly Guide* (latest edition)  
This critical reader provides a definition of each theoretical model and then demonstrates how to apply each theoretical model to a literary text.

#### Recommended

For a concise historical overview of each critical model, see [Johns Hopkins Database of Criticism and Theory](#) (SJSU library log-in required)

### Classical

**PLATO** (ca. 427–ca. 347 B.C.E.)

From *Phaedrus*, *Ion*, & Book VII & X of *The Republic*

**ARISTOTLE** (384–322 B.C.E.)

From *Poetics*

## Romantic

**JOANNA BAILLIE** (1762-1851)

“[Introductory Discourse](#)” to *Plays on the Passions*

**ANNA BARBAULD** (1743-1825)

“On the Pleasure Derived from Objects of Terror” (on [Internet Archive](#) or [Project Gutenberg](#))

**EDMUND BURKE** (1729-1797)

*A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*

From Part I. Sections I-VIII

From Part III. Section XXVII

**SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE** (1772-1834)

From *Biographia Literaria*

Vol. 1 - From Chps. 1, 4, 13

Vol. 2 - From Chp. 14

**WILLIAM WORDSWORTH** (1770–1850)

Preface to *Lyrical Ballads, with Pastoral and Other Poems* (1802)

**PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY** (1792-1822)

From *A Defence of Poetry*

## Contemporary

### 1. Formalism & New Criticism

**T. S. ELIOT** (New Criticism)

“Tradition and the Individual Talent”

**MINDA RAE AMIRAN** (New Criticism)

“Some Paradoxes of New Criticism” (2013) in *The New Criticism:*

*Formalist Literary Theory in America*, Cambridge (3-26) (**PDF**)

**CLEANTH BROOKS** (Formalism)

*The Well Wrought Urn*: Chapter 11. “The Heresy of Paraphrase”

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**MARY ANN CAIN** (Formalism)

"[Problematizing Formalism: A Double-Cross of Genre Boundaries.](#)"

*College Composition and Communication* Vol. 51, No. 1 (Sep., 1999), pp. 89-95. (JSTOR access; requires SJSU log-in)

**JACQUELINE WERNIMONT & COREY MCELANEY** (Formalism)

McEleney C., Wernimont J. (2013) "Re-Reading for Forms in Sir Philip Sidney's Defence of Poesy." In: Theile V., Tredennick L. (eds) *New Formalisms and Literary Theory*. Palgrave Macmillan, London (**PDF**)

**2. Structuralism & Semiotics**

**FERDINAND DE SAUSSURE** (Semiotics)

From *Course in General Linguistics*

Introduction - From Chapter III. "The Object of Linguistic"

Part One. General Principles - Chapter I. "Nature of the Linguistic Sign"

Part Two. "Synchronic Linguistics"

**BARBARA JOHNSON** (Semiotics)

"Writing" in *Critical Terms for Literary Study* (Eds. Lentricchia & McLaughlin) U Chicago P (1995) (**PDF**)

**ROLAND BARTHES** (Transition between Structuralism & Post-Structuralism)

From "Work to Text"

From "Mythologies"

**3. Deconstruction**

**JACQUES DERRIDA**

From [Of Grammatology](#):

Translator's Preface

Part I: "Writing before the Letter"

Exergue

"The Signifier and Truth"

"The Written Being/The Being Written"

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**PAUL DE MAN**

*Allegories of Reading*: Chapter 1: “Semiology and Rhetoric”

**BARBARA JOHNSON**

“[Melville’s Fist: The Execution of \*Billy Budd\*” \*Studies in Romanticism\*](#)

Vol. 18, No. 4, “The Rhetoric of Romanticism” (Winter, 1979), pp. 567-599 (JSTOR access; SJSU library log-in required)

**4. Psychoanalysis**

**SIGMUND FREUD**

*The Interpretation of Dreams*

From Chapter V. “The Material and Sources of Dreams”

From Chapter VI. “The Dream-Work”

From “The Uncanny”

**JACQUES LACAN**

“The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I”

“The Signification of the Phallus”

**CARL JUNG**

“On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetry” *The Spirit in Man, Art and Literature*. 4th ed. Princeton University Press. (1978)  
(PDF)

**LAURA MULVEY**

“Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”

**5. Marxism**

**KARL MARX (1818-1883) and FRIEDRICH ENGELS**

From *The Communist Manifesto*

From Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy Capital*, Volume 1

From Chapter 1. “Commodities”

From Chapter 10. “The Working-Day”

**LOUIS ALTHUSSER**

From *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*

**RAYMOND WILLIAMS**

“Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory”

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**BENITA PARRY**

[“Edward Said and Third World Marxism”](#) *College Literature*, vol. 40 no. 4, 2013, p. 105-126. (ProjectMuse; requires SJSU log-in)

[“Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse”](#) *Oxford Literary Review* Vol. 9, No. 1/2, (1987), pp. 27-58 (JSTOR; requires SJSU log-in)

**6. New Historicism**

**MICHEL FOUCAULT**

“Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison”

*The History of Sexuality*

Volume 1, An Introduction

[Part 4 of Ch 2 on Method](#)

**MIKHAIL M. BAKHTIN**

From *Discourse in the Novel*

**STEPHEN J. GREENBLATT**

From “Resonance and Wonder”

**CATHERINE GALLAGHER**

“Marxism and the New Historicism” in *The New Historicism*. Ed. Veenser. Taylor & Francis, 1989. **(PDF)**

**7. Race Criticism**

**W. E. B. DU BOIS**

*The Souls of Black Folk*

From Chapter 1. “Of Our Spiritual Strivings Criteria of Negro Art”

**TONI MORRISON**

From “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature”

**GLORIA ANZALDÚA**

*Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*

Chapter 7. “*La conciencia de la mestiza*: Towards a New Consciousness”

**HENRY LOUIS GATES JR.**

“Talking Black: Critical Signs of the Times”

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**8. Postcolonialism**

**FRANTZ FANON**

*Black Skin, White Masks*  
From “The Fact of Blackness”  
*The Wretched of the Earth*  
From “On National Culture”

**EDWARD W. SAID**

*Orientalism*, Introduction  
*Culture and Imperialism*, Chapter 2, Section 2. “Jane Austen and Empire”

**GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK**

*A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*  
From Chapter 3. History  
“[Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism](#)” *Critical Inquiry*,  
Vol. 12, No. 1, “Race,” Writing, and Difference (Autumn,  
1985), pp. 243-261

**HOMI BHABHA**

“The Commitment to Theory.” *new formations* No. 5 Summer (1988)

**REVATHI KRISHNASWAMY**

*Effeminism: The Economy Of Colonial Desire* - Introduction (**PDF**)  
“[World Literary Knowledges: Theory In The Age Of Globalization](#)”  
*Comparative Literature* Vol. 62, No. 4 (Fall 2010), pp. 399-419  
(JSTOR; library log-in required)

**9. Feminism**

**MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT**

*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*  
from Chapter II. “The Prevailing Opinion of a Sexual Character  
Discussed”

**SANDRA M. GILBERT and SUSAN GUBAR**

*The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-  
Century Literary Imagination*  
From Chapter 2. “Infection in the Sentence: The Woman Writer  
and the Anxiety of Authorship”

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**HÉLÈNE CIXOUS**

“The Laugh of the Medusa”

**JULIA KRISTEVA**

*Revolution in Poetic Language*

From Part 1. “The Semiotic and the Symbolic”

**10. Postmodernism**

**JEAN-FRANÇOIS LYOTARD**

“Defining the Postmodern”

**FREDRIC JAMESON**

“Postmodernism and Consumer Society”

**BELL HOOKS**

“Postmodern Blackness”

**11. Reader Response**

**WOLFGANG ISER**

“Interaction between Text and Reader”

**LOUISE ROSENBLATT**

“Evoking a Poem” in *The Reader, the Text, The Poem: The Transactional Theory of Literary Work*. Southern Illinois University Press, 1994. 48-70 (**PDF**)

**JANE TOMPKINS**

“The Reader in History” in *Reader-response Criticism: From Formalism To Post-structuralism*. Johns Hopkins UP, 1980. 201-232. (**PDF**)

**STANLEY FISH**

*Is there a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*  
Chapter 14. “How to Recognize a Poem When You See One”

## 12. Queer Theory

**JUDITH BUTLER**

*Gender Trouble*

From Preface

From Chapter 2. “Subversive Bodily Acts”

**JUDITH (JACK) HALBERTSTAM**

*Female Masculinity*

From Chapter 1. “An Introduction to Female Masculinity:  
Masculinity without Men”

**EVE KOSOFSKY SEDGWICK**

*Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*

From Introduction

**BONNIE ZIMMERMAN**

“What Has Never Been: An Overview of Lesbian Feminist Literary  
Criticism” *Feminist Studies* Vol. 7, No. 3 (Autumn, 1981),  
pp. 451-475 (JSTOR; requires SJSU log-in)

## 13. Disability Studies

**LENNARD J. DAVIS**

*Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body*

From Chapter 6. “Visualizing the Disabled Body: The Classical  
Nude and the Fragmented Torso”

## 14. Digital Humanities

Definition of “[Digital Humanities](#)” in *Wikipedia*

**MATTHEW K. GOLD**

“[Introduction](#)” *Debates in the Digital Humanities* (2012)

**MATTHEW KIRSCHENBAUM**

“[What is Digital Humanities](#)” *Debates in Digital Humanities* (2012)



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**KATHLEEN FITZPATRICK**

[“The Humanities Done Digitally”](#) *Debates in Digital Humanities* (2012)

**LAUREN F. KLEIN & MATTHEW K. GOLD**

[“Introduction”](#) *Debates in Digital Humanities* (2016)

**LAUREN F. KLEIN & MATTHEW K. GOLD**

[“Introduction”](#) *Debates in Digital Humanities* (2019)

**15. Ecocriticism**

**ROB NIXON**

*Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*

From Introduction

“The Anthropocene: The Promise and Pitfalls of an Epochal Idea”

**WILLIAM CRONIN**

[“The Trouble With Wilderness: Or Getting Back to the Wrong Nature”](#) in

William Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1995, 69-90.

**STACEY ALAIMO**

“Introduction: Bodily Natures” from *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Indiana UP, 2010. (PDF)

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**Sample Questions:**

1. Choose three different theories from the list below to analyze this poem.

Poem: Harlem (Langston Hughes)

Theory list: Semiotics  
Deconstruction  
Feminism  
Psychoanalysis  
Marxism

2. Below are three short excerpts of literary criticism on Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Examine each one carefully. Then, identify the theoretical approach used in each case; explain how you can tell by briefly discussing (a) what assumptions about language/literature the critic makes (b) what terms the critic uses (c) what aspects of the text the critic focuses on/leaves out, and (d) what kind of evidence the critic gives to support arguments/claims. Conclude with a brief comment on how useful or persuasive you find each approach. Be clear, specific, and to-the-point.
3. As literary criticism has moved into the late 20th and 21st centuries, theories have been developed to give rise to variant voices and methodologies, including New Historicism, Ecocriticism, Disability Studies, and Digital Humanities. How do these four critical models build on early 20th-century critical models such as Formalism, New Criticism, Semiotics, or Deconstruction?