

Critical Lenses 101



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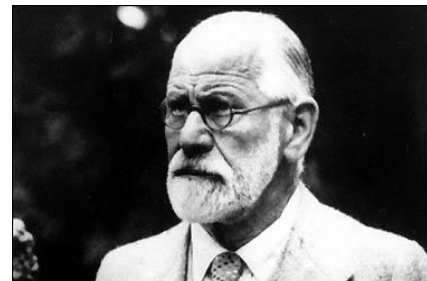
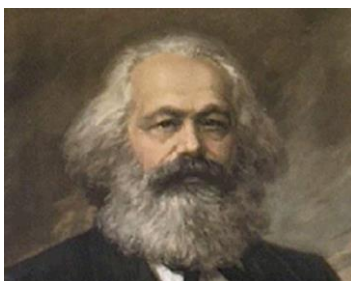
This handout contains a simplified version of three critical theories. It is shared online in a weebly blog – my thanks to its creator.

There are many critical frameworks we should use to interpret literature, film, art, drama, music, or anything you experience. You might study up to 15 other critical/theoretical approaches in your college experience. Three of the most useful and relevant frameworks are **Marxist** literary criticism, **Feminist** literary criticism, and **Freudian** literary criticism.

These lenses add insights into our lives and into the literature, film, art, drama, music, or anything else you are experiencing. To be efficient and clear, I will use the word “EXHIBIT” to mean whatever (book, film, painting, play, song, college visit, board game, military situation...) it is that we are studying, analyzing, and examining.

“EXHIBIT” = novel, play, song, sculpture, film, poem, concert, painting, myth, sketch, poster, artwork, photograph, t-shirt, television show, biography, speech, advertisement, event, place/building (school, office), game, brochure, practice, rehearsal, ritual, haircut/style, website, routine, job, suit coat...

Some of the following was condensed from *Beginning Theory* by Peter Barry. The teacher who created this HO studied these lenses in English courses, particularly ENGL 380 with Prof. Mark Van Wienen at Augustana College and ENGL 786 with Prof. Skip Willman at USD. Karl Marx, Laura Mulvey, and Sigmund Freud:



Marxist Critical Lens

→ How does money matter/function in this exhibit?

→ How does a power system matter/function in this exhibit?

Named after Karl Marx but not promoting communism, this lens helps us examine how socioeconomic factors influence the characters, plot, setting, reader/viewer, author/maker, time period, or any other aspect of an exhibit.

Karl Marx said that human history can be studied best by looking at how the proletariat (lower, working classes; blue collar jobs) interacts with the bourgeoisie (the middle/upper classes; white collar jobs).

Louis Althusser added to this theoretical/ critical approach. His term "**interpellation**" helps us examine how we are convinced by our oppressive systems to keep doing the miserable work we do for the system (because what is good for the system leads to good conditions for the individual—which, we know is not always the case). Althusser explored how **ideological state apparatuses** (ISAs) control and sculpt: family, church, work, law, school, arts, sciences...

From Dr. Patrick Hicks at Augustana College: Maybe talk about "economic geography" in addition to Marxist Theory? It's good to remind students that geography isn't just about physical space, but mental space as well. Where are the poor situated in these novels? Why? How are families units also financial units? If nations have borders, don't the rich and poor as well? We all know where the "the other side of the tracks" is but who decided where to put the tracks?

What Marxist critics do:

- a. Make a division between the "overt" (manifest or surface) and "covert" (latent or hidden) content of a literary work
- b. Relate the context of a work to the social-class status of the author
- c. Explain the nature of a whole literary genre in terms of the social period which "produced" it
- d. Relate the literary work to the social assumptions of the time in which it is "consumed" (or read, viewed...)
- e. Look for symbols that create or reveal an
 1. "individual versus exploitive system" theme
 2. "oppressive culture" theme
 3. "individual as dehumanized, mechanized, roboticized, zombieified—only serving the larger cause; only producing for 'greater good'" theme
- f. Evaluate the systems of, in, around, about, near the exhibit

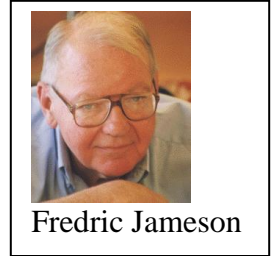
Questions Marxist Critics Ask:

1. How do social classes interact with each other? Is there greed?
2. Do any characters climb the "social/economic ladder"? Why? How?
3. Is a system oppressive to its members? Does the system exploit its members?
4. Are there social tensions? Are the ruling classes happy? Are the lower classes miserable? Or, are the lower classes *actually happier* because they are not as oppressed by their upper/ruling class rigid rule system?

5. Are the lower/working classes exploited? Does capitalism have a conscience concerning its citizens who are helpless, hopeless, powerless?
6. Are characters given more/less freedom by their class?
7. Are any of the characters "suffocated" by their class rules, codes, & costs?
8. How do "uppers"/"winners" flaunt or exploit their wealth or power?

Key Terms in Marxist Literary Theory:

base superstructure proletariat bourgeoisie
class interpellation class mobility oppression
ideology ideological state apparatus meritocracy
money = power, influence, freedom, happiness, opportunity



Exhibits that fit under a **Marxist** lens nicely:

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest *Robots* *To Kill a Mockingbird*
Monsters, Inc. *Antz* *1984* *The Lion King* *Star Trek* *Star Wars*
Office Space *Brandon Valley High School* (*eyes are watching you!*)
The Matrix Trilogy *Harry Potter Series* *The Time Machine* *Titanic*

Feminist Critical Lens

- How does gender matter/function in this exhibit?
- How are women portrayed/depicted in this exhibit?

This lens helps us examine how gender is a factor in an exhibit. The main focus is on how women are portrayed, how they function, behave, are limited/privileged for being women. However, we also examine how maleness defines roles & limits men.

What Feminist critics do:

- a. Rethink the canon—the accepted "greats" of all-time—to include women authors, poets, directors, actors
- b. Examine representations of women in literature and film by male and female authors & moviemakers
- c. Challenge representations of women as "Other", as "lack", as part of "nature" (whereas, men are part of "culture" and better than "natural" or "emotional")
- d. Raise the question of whether men and women are "essentially" different because of biology, or are socially constructed as different (subjugating women as "worse" than men in the important ways)

Questions Feminist Critics Ask:

1. Are there "natural" roles men and women fill?
2. To what extent are our roles created by culture?
 - i. Nature vs. nurture
3. Who puts limitations on genders?



4. Who grants privileges to a gender?
5. Examines these two statements:
 - i. A "woman" is/has _____ (adjective, image, trait, ability...)
 - ii. A "man" is/has _____ (adjective, image, trait, ability...)
6. Should we scrap our created gender roles and stereotypes?
7. How does a creator's gender affect an exhibit?
8. What are the social expectations of men and women in this exhibit?
9. Are the social norms different for men and women?
10. How does society value men and women differently? What about men is valued? What about women is valued?

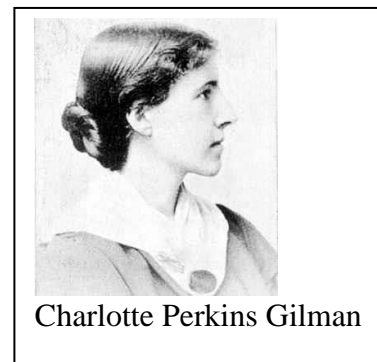


Key Terms in Feminist Literary Theory:

subjugate	"other"	gender roles	agency
hegemony	oppression	gender expectations	
exploitation	relative meaning		

Double standards; degrading language system created by male-dominated power structure:

Women	Men (describing the same behavior)	
negative	positive	CONNOTATION
chick	= dude	<i>binary oppositions!!!</i>
&itchy	= tough	
slut/whore	= stud	
(just) cute	= cool	
ditz	= stoic, quiet	
crazy	= temper	



Biological limitations: have women been encouraged to use their minds more than men, because men get more respect for being physical rather than mental? Are girls "better" students than boys? Why? Yet, why do boys speak more in class discussions?

Exhibits that fit under a **Feminist** lens nicely: elementary schools

Harry Potter	Twilight	Unforgiven (or any cowboy story)	Office Space
1984	Juno	The Lion King	To Kill a Mockingbird
Dukes of Hazzard	Ocean's 11	Million Dollar Baby	The Reader
The Ugly Truth	300	P.S. I Love You	Superbad
No Country for Old Men	The Road	Book of Eli	Lady Gaga
			perfume ads

Freudian Psychoanalytic Critical Lens

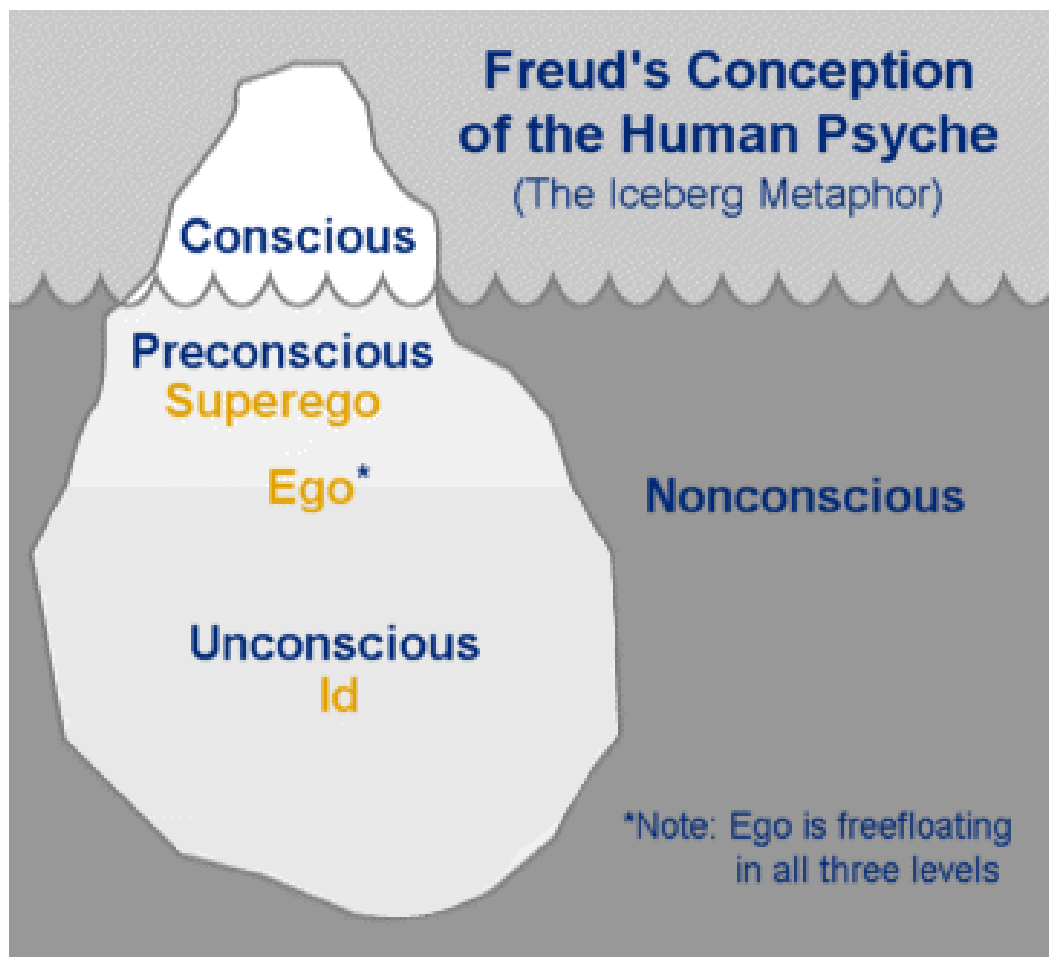
- How does psychoanalysis matter in this exhibit?
- What does psychoanalysis reveal about this exhibit?

→ How does libido influence this exhibit?

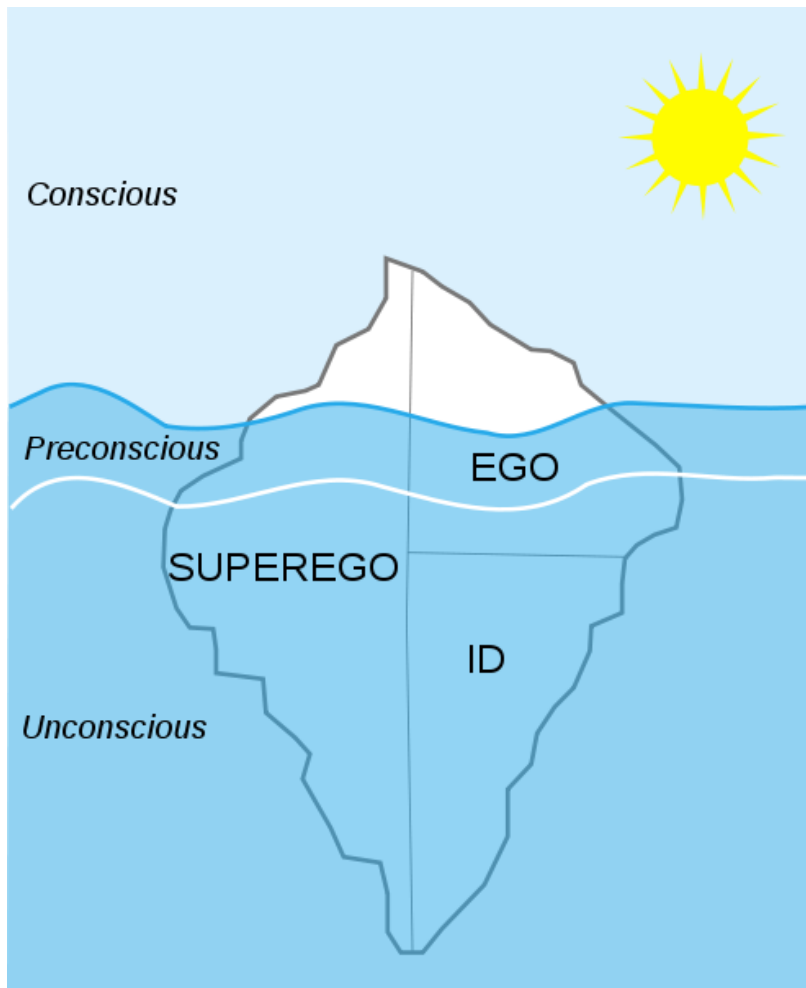
This lens helps us examine how inner workings of the brain influence every aspect of an exhibit.

What Freudian/Psychoanalytic critics do:

- Examine how each character attempts to re-achieve the narcissistic bliss we get to experience as babies; look for a possible “Oedipal complex” in any parent-child type of relationship (need not be biologically related characters; any mentor-protégé relationship may be analyzed like this)
- Examine how each character attempts to re-achieve a narcissistic bliss of ordered predictability and familiarity (this familiarity might be chaos, as in the case of the Joker of *The Dark Knight*—he is familiar with chaos, so he continually seeks disorder and creates mayhem). Some characters do things that make them miserable, as if they are determined to be miserable (the sympathy they acquire from other characters and the readers is what they have been seeking all along).
- Explore the ways the libidos (sex drives) of the author, reader, character(s) work to influence the exhibit.
- In the Freudian tradition and manner, psychoanalyze all people involved in the exhibit.



<http://allpsych.com/images/iceberg.gif>



Sandra Gilbert



Mikhail Bakhtin

<http://files.myopera.com>

Questions Freudian/Psychoanalytic Critics Ask:

1. Is the id winning in any character?
2. Do any characters represent the id, the superego, or the ego?
3. Are any of the characters repressing any of their true urges, dreams, or goals?
4. Are there any sexual symbols? (Freud researched and forced us to recognize our biological hard-wiring.) Do these symbols imply anything about power?
5. How are the characters seeking stages of narcissistic bliss?
6. What is going on in the mind of any character in an exhibit?

Key Terms in Freudian Theory:

superego	id	ego	oppression
Oedipal complex	condensation	phallus	repression
dream interpretation	displacement	narcissism	denial
narcissistic bliss	Freudian slip	envy	guilt

Exhibits that fit under a **Freudian** lens nicely:

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest *Lord of the Flies* *The Lion King* *Office Space*
The Dark Knight *Gran Torino* *The Odyssey* *To Kill a Mockingbird* *Life of Pi*

SAMPLE CRITICAL STATEMENTS USING THE LENSES

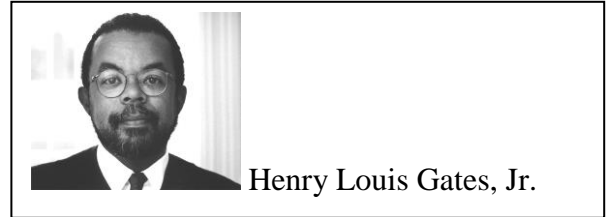


Exhibit A: One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest

This novel and film must be analyzed with all possible critical lenses, because it is so rich in content.

Feminist Lens

How does her female-ness influence our reading of Nurse Ratched?

Would a man in the same position as Ratched be viewed differently by the characters, readers, critics?

How are women depicted in this novel? Japanese nurse, Vera Harding, Nurse Pilbow, Billy's mother, night supervisor, Chief Bromden's mom—

How is McMurphy the ultimate "man's man"? The symbol of masculinity?

How has the standard, expected American family structure oppressed the male's urges, impulses, freedoms, passions, hopes, needs, dreams, thrills, adventures?

Is Nurse Ratched taking on a "man's role" by being in charge on the ward?

Marxist Lens

How does McMurphy's childhood poverty affect him?

How does Chief Bromden's Indian heritage affect him?

Much importance is placed on the dam, which damages the river and floods a sacred area. The dam is built for moneymaking and energy-producing purposes (for white people's benefit).

What has the system done to Dale Harding? Why does the system reject him—and all the other guys? How is the Combine harming/preventing individuality?

Is the state/federal government spending enough on true rehabilitation?

How does Kesey's background as a hippy farmer influence his storytelling?

How is Dr. Spivey privileged but suffering from his social status and income?

Do any of these men come from privilege or high socioeconomic status?

Freudian Lens

How much does each character obey their id? Does McMurphy = the id?

How much does each character obey their superego?

What is Nurse Ratched's narcissistic bliss? Total order and structure? What made her the way she is?

Is Chief telling the "truth"? In what ways is his version untrustworthy? Unreliable? Twisted? When is his id taking over? When is his superego ruling?

In Chief's hallucinations and dreams, what does each entity represent or mean?

What might/do each of Colonel Matterson's seemingly absurd statements mean?

What does war do to the psyche? Has Chief reverted to a silent, safe "baby state"?

How are the *Moby Dick* boxer shorts symbolic or significant? Billy's nickname?

Is there anything Oedipal about the McMurphy-Nurse Ratched relationship?

Exhibit B: The Lion King

A Marxist viewing:

- We get frustrated. Mufasa is only in power because he is physically strong and male. We realize Scar should be in power: he is smarter. Scar is the only one not given a really cool African name. Mufasa would rather teach Simba how to pounce, attack, and fight than listen to an important bulletin/report from Zazu, his senior advisor/cabinet member.
- Timon and Pumba are bachelors who reject their oppressive societies that expect them to be responsible, fatherly, hard-working, and good for the reproducing the modes of production.
- **Marxist:** Can be viewed as the upper class (lions) trying to maintain power over an unhappy lower class (hyenas). The lower class resents the privileges of better food and hunting grounds that the upper class maintains. This conflict causes a rebellion, which disrupts the normal social order causing chaos and destruction.

http://comosr.spps.org/Lit_Theory.html

Feminist lens:

- Reveals that Nala should be the one in power. She can physically whip Simba (when they are young and when they are mature); and physical domination is valued in this society. She is more loyal, responsible, intelligent, diligent, and unselfish than Simba, who is pretty pathetic.
- Shows how subservient all the female lions are. They do all the work, get none of the credit, and must share partners. Mufasa has at least ten sexual partners he gets to enjoy and impregnate. Sarabi is demure, passive, pretty, a dutiful possession.

A Freudian viewing:

- Shows Pride Rock as a phallic symbol of male prominence and domination.
- A Freudian lens also shows us the reasons Simba stays with Timon and Pumba. These two bachelors are free from responsibility and offer a sort of narcissistic bliss that Freud theorized we are always trying to re-achieve after we lose the bliss we once experienced as babies (completely cared for; without responsibility or stress; not inhibited or judged or oppressed by society yet).
- The Lion King is also a lot like Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, a highly psychological play with Oedipal leanings.

Exhibit C: Napoleon Dynamite

Seeing this film through a **Marxist lens**, we explore...

- ✓ The injustices done by Summer, Summer's boyfriend, and other powerful characters (the "haves") to Napoleon and Pedro (the "have-nots").
- ✓ How would Napoleon be different if he had a supportive, wealthy, intelligent extended family with a legacy to live up to?
- ✓ How is Pedro's family happy as heck—even in their impoverished state?
- ✓ How does having so few life experiences limit your wisdom and potential?

Feminist lens: It is awful how Uncle Rico goes around trying to objectify women even further than they have been already—by selling them bust enhancement products. Rico is a product of a culture that overvalues macho traits like “being a stud athlete” or “having a sweet babe.” He is obsessed with videotaping himself throwing a football, though he is a 35+ year-old loser living in a van.

Exhibit D: Harry Potter

Feminist lens:

We see Hermione Granger as undervalued, unassertive, mocked for being smart

Freudian lens:

Are the broomsticks phallic symbols? We know that witches rode brooms in folklore, so why is it mainly men who are featured on broomsticks in Quidditch?

Does Ron Weasley eat excessively because he cannot control his id? Is he giving in to his primal urges?

Marxist lens:

Does Ron Weasley eat excessively because he comes from a poor home—and he needs to feel full? Does he eat greedily because he has never been able to?

Is Harry Potter special for any other reason than he won the genetic lottery and was granted a certain gift, never having done anything to earn this gift?

<http://listfreak.wordpress.com>

Much discussion has exposed JK Rowling as an obvious Marxist, attempting to pollute the minds of our youth with Communist propaganda. The “pure-blood” Slytherins represent the aristocracy, who believe that “magic” (i.e. capital) should be in the hands of a privileged elite. The “clever” Ravenclaws represent the bourgeoisie, who collude with the aristocracy in the suppression of the petty-bourgeois Hufflepuffs and the proletarian house-elves. The brave Gryffindors (who wear red Quidditch robes) and Dumbledore’s Army represent the Red Army, the true army of the proletariat.

Exhibit E: Twilight

Feminist lens:

Bella is needy, reliant, dependent, subordinate, protected (the exact opposites of what Edward Cullen is).

Freudian lens:

How do desire for _____ and sex influence this narrative?

Is being a vampire a state of narcissistic bliss? = immortality and endless wisdom, feed gluttonously, lust, power over all, danger, taste, class, strength, speed...

Marxist lens:

Bella is a poor kid with only her father to support her. “Edward” is an extremely “rich-sounding” name. The vampires are wealthy, educated, and powerful (even a medical doctor).

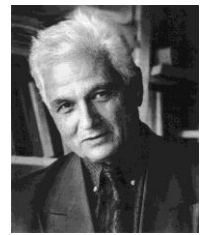
It is also productive to analyze the **functions** of exhibits in our lives. These are just a few of the many functions of exhibits:

Functions of Fiction

- Show beauty and possibilities of language.
- Create meaning; make events matter.
- Make symbols mean something.
- Make nothing mean something.
- Order, structure, and understand the world.
- Order and attempt to understand what it means to be "human."
- Open the world up to us.
- Understand life.
- Understand self.
- Lift our spirits.
- Reveal, examine, explore, show, explode something.
- Teach us something (stories can accomplish this better than lectures, right?).
- Relate past to present to future.
- Give us perspective.
- Make us wonder.



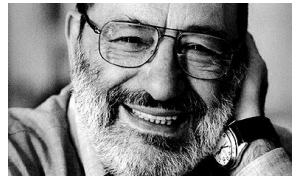
Roland Barthes



Jacques Derrida



Michel Foucault



Umberto Eco



Terry Eagleton

Functions of the Artist/Author

- Be a cultural analyst/evaluator.
- Challenge or upset the status quo, which glazes over and oppresses (be a renegade or watchdog).
- Explore/expose the "taboo."
- Discuss the "undiscussable."
- Examine the question--does "honesty" = "truth."
- Instruct and delight us.
- Make us explore beliefs, views, ethics.



Edward Said—Postcolonialism

Helpful Literary Criticism and Theory Sites

<http://textetc.com/>

<http://www.ipl.org/div/litcrit/>

<http://www.ipl.org/div/litcrit/guide.html>

<http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Lit/>

<http://www.shmoop.com/>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Literary_criticism

<http://www.libraryspot.com/litcrit.htm>

<http://42explore.com/litcrit.htm>

<http://www.sdst.org/shs/library/whatislit.html>

<http://litguide.press.jhu.edu/>

<http://www.cddc.vt.edu/feminism/lit.html>

http://comosr.spps.org/Lit_Theory.html



Louis Althusser—
Marxist (Ideology)



bell hooks—Feminist