What is criticism?

1. In the non-literary sense, criticism is basically “constructive criticism,” or someone berating you to help you to improve yourself.
2. In the literary sense, however, critics are reviewers. Sharing an opinion over a piece of literature has developed into a genre called criticism.
3. Not only does literature influence criticism, but also criticism influences literature.

What is new criticism?

1. New criticism is a genre defending “new” works of art or literature, stating that criticism is interpretation (not “thumbs up” or “thumbs down.”)
2. This genre first started to appear in the 20th century.
3. New criticism tries to understand what a text is about, how it describes things, how it makes you feel, and finally what its themes or philosophical interpretations are.
4. New criticism eventually evolved into literary theory.
5. Literary theory is a broad concept. Everyone can have their own interpretation of a text, if it is backed up by evidence.
6. There are many different branches of literary theory.

General Points About Literary Theory:

1. Criticism does not imply value judgment. Instead of just saying that a text is good or bad, literary theory is more investigative. Literary theory tells us why and how a text functions, or does what it does.
2. The history of literary theory is intertwined with philosophy. European Continental philosophy thinkers, like Nietzsche, Sartre, and Marx, have contributed a lot to criticism and literary theory. Philosophy is analyzing life and how we live it, and books are a metaphor for life, so philosophers have often analyzed books as well.
3. Literary theory is not confined to just books. The deep, thorough analysis so necessary to literary theory can be applied almost anywhere, such as plays, music albums, and even people.
4. Always try to look at a text through many different lenses, not just through one side. Also, the author’s intent shouldn’t be paramount is a big key idea in every form of literary theory.
5. To determine what type of literary theory is being used in a text, you can ask the question: “Where does conflict exist in a text?”

Major Types of Literary Theory:

1. Formalism:
2. Major Critics of the Time: Mikhail Bakhtin.
3. Overview: Most modern criticism is based on formalism. Began in Russia in early 20th century. Formalists rejected previous romantic ideas, which placed value on the genius of the author, not so much on the text. To formalists, only the text matters. The importance of the author is questioned. New criticism, which happens in England much later, is almost exactly like formalism. In new criticism and formalism, critics did close reading, which means picking out the important details and examining each of these.
4. Major Critical Works: “The Intentional Fallacy,” by William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley. This article says that whatever the author meant to write or mean does not matter. It only matters about your understanding of the text, as long as it is backed up by evidence.
5. Deconstructionism:
6. Major Critics of the Time: Jacques Derrida
7. Overview: All texts contain inherent contradictions. All things—including words—only have meaning in relation, or opposition to other things. For example, truth means “not false.” But what does false mean? Again you have to refer to truth, so this is a contradiction. Deconstructionism studies these aspects, where concepts inside a text come into conflict with each other, and they try to break down what’s actually happening.
8. Major Themes of Deconstructionism:  
   i. Deconstructionism looks at the accidental elements inside a text. Accidental elements are anything that doesn’t seem central to the text. For example, if an author describes a scene in a café, and before that describes the café itself, the café is not actually central to the text. Why is the author spending time describing the café if it is not central to the text? These are the questions deconstructionism looks at.

ii. Deconstructionism looks at things that disturb the tranquility of the text.

iii. Deconstruction also attempts to uncover the questions behind a text.

1. Postmodernism:
2. Overview: Study of differences inside a text as well as the study of contradictions as in deconstructionism. Also, the literary canon, or the books that you ought to read, consists of authors who were not only dead white men, but also who were women, people of color, and others as well. Diversifying the body of literature was a main idea of postmodernism.
3. Major Themes of Postmodernism:
4. Questioning Objective Thought. How much influence does an author actually have in a text?
5. The role of the other, or the socially marginalized individual
6. Subgenres of Postmodernism:
7. Feminist Theory:
8. Overview: Examines literature through the lens of gender relations and the equality of gender relations, as the socially marginalized individual were often women.
9. Literary Examples: You can look at Homer’s Odyssey and examine how women are portrayed, being the “other.”
10. Books about Feminist Theory: Gender Trouble, by Judith Butler
11. Queer Theory:
12. Overview: Same idea as feminist theory, but instead of looking at how women were undermined, queer theorists look at the LGBT presence.
13. Books about queer theory: Gender Trouble, by Judith Butler
14. Other Authors about queer theory: Gerard Manley Hopkins
15. Marxist Theory:
16. Overview: Similar to Communism. It analyzes literature through the lens of class relations, or how people are related to each other in social standing, as in a factory, with factory owners and factory workers.
17. Person associated with Marxism: Carl Marx, who wrote about how the proletariat, people of lower-social standing, such as factory workers, would rise against the bourgeoisie, the people of higher-social standing, such as factory owners.
18. Postcolonialism:
19. Overview: Postcolonialists examine how nations exert their cultural capital (resources), or hegemony, over others.
20. Examples: Great Britain, at the height of the British Empire, dominated other countries by influencing them with their cultural capital, as well as physically, such as invading.
21. Literary Examples: “Jane Eyre,” with a crazy Jamaican wife in the attic and gets in the way of Jane marrying Rochester. Postcolonialists look at this in the sense: why is Jamaica chosen? Are all people from that region portrayed as savage?
22. Books:
23. “Wide Sargasso Sea,” by Jean Rhys, written from the perspective of Bertha, the mad wife.
24. “Heart of Darkness,” by Joseph Conrad, about conflicts between Native Americans and settlers.
25. “Orientalism,” written by Edward Said, about how studying Islamic society, we are actually looking through the perspective of European society, so we still don’t fully understand what Islamic society is about.