What is literary criticism?
The practice of describing, interpreting, and evaluating literature.

Most basic way of classifying theories and practices involves a four-part scheme which distinguishes critical approaches “according to whether, in explaining and judging a work of literature, they refer to the outer world, or to the reader, or to the author, or else look upon the work as an entity in itself.”
There are three major purposes of literary criticism

1) To help solve a problem in the reading.
2) To help us choose the better of two conflicting readings.
3) To help us evaluate literature.
Humanism

1. Good literature is of timeless significance.
2. The literary text contains its own meaning within itself.
3. The best way to study the text is to study the words on the page, without any predefined agenda for what one wants to find there.
4. The text will reveal constants, universal truths, about human nature, because human nature itself is constant and unchanging. People are pretty much the same everywhere, in all ages and in all cultures.
5. The text can speak to the inner truths of each of us because our individuality, our "self," is something unique to each of us, something essential to our inner core. This inner essential self can and does transcend all external social forces (i.e. no matter what happens to me, I will always be me).
6. The purpose of literature is the enhancement of life and the propagation of humane values; on the other hand, literature should always be "disinterested," i.e. it should never have an overt agenda of trying to change someone (or it will become propaganda).
7. In a literary work, form and content are fused together, and are integral parts of each other.
8. A literary work is "sincere," meaning it is honest, true to experience and human nature, and thus can speak the truth about the human condition.
9. What is valuable in literature is that it shows us our true nature, and the true nature of society, without preaching (like point 6); it shows through drama, event, character, and conflict, rather than explaining, lecturing, or demonstrating.
10. What critics do is interpret the text (based largely on the words on the page) so that the reader can get more out of reading the text.

These points sum up what most of us learned as the way you think about literature (and about human nature and the world), rather than as a specific kind of theory.
Structuralism

analyzes language and literature as structures.
not interested in what makes an individual literary work unique but in what it has in common with other literary works.
looks for the “codes” and “conventions” that are in operation within all works in one GENRE. All elements of culture, including literature are thought to be parts of a system of signs.
deals with semiotics (the study of signs, or signals of communication, including words, Morse code, music, traffic signals, gestures, facial expressions, clothing, or anything that can be said to communicate meaning)
looks for recurring images, common elements that transcend the differences within and among cultures.
Sign systems must be understood in terms of binary oppositions: In analyzing myths and texts to find basic structures, structuralists found that opposite terms modulate until they are finally resolved or reconciled by some intermediary third terms.
Thus a structuralist reading of Paradise Lost might show that the war between God and the rebellious angels becomes a rift between God and sinful, fallen man, a rift that is healed by the Son of God, the mediating third term.
To the formalist critic, art is STYLE, technique and craftsmanship, and the primary function of criticism is the objective and “scientific” analysis of literary style.
Jacques Derrida, leading figure insists it’s not a theory but rather a set of strategies or ways of reading.

Every philosophical system, every attempt to explain the relations among the mind, the self and the word, posited some sort of center, a point from which everything comes and to which everything refers. One example is God; in some systems it’s the human mind or the unconscious.

First thing deconstruction adds to structuralism: all structures have a center.

Hard to see language this way

**Binary Opposition**

Second thing is the idea of binary oppositions.

Derrida says that, within such structures based on binary pairs, one part of the pair is always given a higher cultural value than the other; one term is marked as positive and the other as negative. Example: Good better than evil.

Sometimes it’s obvious like previous example but other times not so much, like why is male better than female or white better than black?

That is exactly what deconstruction is asking.

What would happen to the structure of Western thought if we took the binary opposites apart?
Freudian

- Includes pinpointing the influences of a character’s **id** (unrestrained, pleasure seeking), **superego** (represses id) and the **ego** (controls id’s impulses and releases them in a healthy manner). Freudian critics like to point out the sexual implications of symbols and imagery. Tend to see **concave** images, such as ponds, flowers, cups, and caves as female symbols; whereas other objects are seen as **phallic symbols**.

- **Oedipus complex**.

- **Psychology of child development**: oral, anal and genital stage.
Jungian

Jung is also an influential force in myth (archetypal criticism. Psychological critics are generally concerned with his concept of the process of individuation (the process of discovering what makes one different from everyone else). Jung labeled three parts of the self: the shadow or the darker, unconscious self (usually the villain in literature); the persona, or a man’s social personality (usually the hero in literature); and the anima, or the contrasexual part of the psyche, a man’s “soul image” (usually the heroine in literature). A neurosis occurs when someone fails to assimilate one of these unconscious components into his conscious and instead projects it on someone else. The persona must be flexible and be able to bring the other components of the psyche into harmony.
Feminism

Feminist criticism is concerned with the impact of gender on writing and reading. It usually begins with a critique of a patriarchal culture. It is concerned with the place of female writers. Finally, it includes a search for a feminine theory or approach to texts. Feminist criticism is always political and usually revisionist. Feminists often argue that male fears and anxieties are portrayed through female characters. They may argue that gender determines everything, or conversely, that all gender differences are imposed by society, and gender determines nothing.
Marxist

A sociological approach to literature that views works of literature or art as the products of historical forces that can be analyzed by looking at the material conditions in which they were formed. In Marxist ideology, what we often classify as a world view (such as the Victorian age) is actually the articulations of the dominant class. Marxism generally focuses on the clash between the dominant and repressed classes in any given age and also may encourage art to imitate what is often termed an "objective" reality. Marx saw culture as repressive, a method of coercing the masses to obey. Popular culture is as a part of the control apparatus of industrial capitalism. Signs of class struggle may appear in works of fiction.
Archetypal/Myth Criticism

A form of criticism based largely on the works of C. G. Jung and Joseph Campbell (and myth itself). These critics view the genres and individual plot patterns of literature, including highly sophisticated and realistic works, as recurrences of certain archetypes and essential mythic formulae. Archetypes, according to Jung, are "primordial images"; the "psychic residue" of repeated types of experience in the lives of very ancient ancestors which are inherited in the "collective unconscious" of the human race and are expressed in myths, religion, dreams, and private fantasies, as well as in the works of literature. Some common examples of archetypes include water, sun, moon, colours, circles, the Great Mother, Wise Old Man, etc. In terms of archetypal criticism, the colour white might be associated with innocence or could signify death or the supernatural.
Reader Response

Analyzes the reader’s role in the production of meaning. It lies at the opposite end of the spectrum from formalist criticism. In reader response, the text itself has no meaning until it is read by a reader. The reader creates the meaning. This criticism can take into account the strategies employed by the author to elicit a certain response from readers. It denies the possibility that works are universal and will always mean the same thing to readers everywhere. Each reader imposes his or her own identity, theme on the text, to a large extent recreating that text in the reader’s image. Therefore, we can understand someone’s reading as a function of personal identity.
Existential Criticism

Philosophy (promoted especially by Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus) that views each person as an isolated being who is cast into an alien universe, and conceives the world as possessing no inherent human truth, value, or meaning. A person's life, as it moves from the nothingness from which it came toward the nothingness where it must end, defines an existence which is both anguished and absurd. In a world without sense, all choices are possible, a situation which Sartre viewed as human beings central dilemma: "Man [woman] is condemned to be free." Existentialism involves the attempt to make meaning in a chaotic world. Sartre argued, "man makes himself." Existentialists seeks to analyze literary works, with special emphasis on the struggle to define meaning and identity in the face of alienation and isolation.

**Absurd** - existence--a world without inherent meaning or truth.

**Authenticity** - to make choices based on an individual code of ethics rather than because of societal pressures. A choice made just because "it's what people do" would be considered inauthentic.

"**Leap of faith**" – term used by Christian existentialists. Kierkegaard acknowledged that religion was inherently unknowable and filled with risks, faith required an act of commitment (considering paradoxes that exist in Christianity)
Historical/Cultural

See works as a reflection of an author’s life and times (or of the characters life and times.) They believe it is necessary to know about the author and the political, economic, and sociological context of his/her times in order to truly understand the work. Some critics suggest that it reduces art to the level of biography and make it relative to the times rather than universal.
New Historicism

Developed during 80’s, largely as a reaction to text-only approach of formalist New Critics. New historicists acknowledge the importance of the literary text, but they also analyze the text with an eye to history. Focus on interplay between text and historical context (such as author’s life or intentions in writing the work). They are less fact and event oriented than historical critics used to be, perhaps because they have come to wonder whether the truth about what really happened can ever be purely or objectively known. They are less likely to see history as linear and progressive, as something developing toward the present, and they are also less likely to think of in terms of specific eras, each with a definite, persistent, and consistent zeitgeist (spirit of the times). Hence they are less likely to suggest that a literary text has a single or easily identifiable historical context. History is not an evolutionary process, a continuous development from cause to effect, from past to present toward THE END, a moment of definite closure, a Day of Judgment. No historical event, has a single cause; rather, each event is tied into a vast web of economic, social, and political factors.
Post-Colonial

Literally, postcolonialism refers to the period following the decline of colonialism, e.g., the end or lessening of domination by European empires. Although the term postcolonialism generally refers to the period after colonialism, the distinction is not always made. In its use as a critical approach, postcolonialism refers to "a collection of theoretical and critical strategies used to examine the culture (literature, politics, history, and so forth) of former colonies of the European empires, and their relation to the rest of the world." Among the many challenges facing postcolonial writers are the attempt both to resurrect their culture and to combat preconceptions about their culture. After the decline of imperialism, countries such as Asia, African, and the Caribbeans were left to rebuild their countries, their culture, government etc. In the process, many third-world writers focus on both colonialism and the changes created in a postcolonial culture. Postcolonial writers attempt to correct misconceptions/misrepresentations of artists and writers from outside the region they purport to represent.