

## ENGL 299—Sample Answers—Test 1

### **1. Explain the Leavis Method of literary criticism and how the advent of literary theory in the 1980s changed some of the assumptions of this earlier method of criticism.**

The Leavis Method of literary criticism approached literature from an objective lens. The goal of literature was to humanize and civilize people. The text should be read and analyzed through close reading, which demonstrated a scientific approach to literary analysis. The Leavis Method also stated that the reader should have a “sensitivity” when reading the text, all the while remaining objective. There is a defined literary canon of works that are considered essential to literature, and these works contain an intrinsic artistry that is not bound by context. Literary theory in the 1980s took a very different approach to reading and interpreting a text. The poststructuralist view acknowledges that objectivity is unachievable, as every reader brings with him or her many presuppositions that influence a reading of a text. The context in which the text was written should be considered when analyzing literature. Because literature cannot be interpreted objectively, the Leavis concept of a “canon” is disputable because every reader interprets a work and its “greatness” differently.

### **2. Where does meaning in a literary text come from? What are some of the dangers/pitfalls of assuming that meaning is simply something put in a text by an author? What about ascribing meaning wholly to readers’ interpretations?**

Meaning in a text can come from a few different sources. The most obvious of these sources is the author him/herself. Wimsatt and Beardsley, however, disagreed with this source saying that the author’s intention should not matter. Barthes claimed that relying solely on the author’s intention/meaning limited one’s reading of a text. Another source of meaning can be the reader. This is tricky because every reader may see a different meaning. It is crucial, then, that a critic/reader be able to back up their reading with evidence from the text itself and/or external sources. A reading must be able to apply to more than just one reader; it cannot be so specific that it makes no sense to anyone else.

### **3. Describe the difference between the terms “self” and “subject” as used and understood in literary theory.**

Self is a term more often associated with humanist theory. The “self” is thought to be a rational and free-thinking individual. The “subject,” on the other hand, suggests that individuals are products of their surrounding culture and other external factors (such as social class, upbringing, gender, etc.) In terms of the nature vs. nurture argument, “self” is associated with inherent nature and “subject” with nurture.

### **4. What is the “Great Man” view of history and how does it compare to New Historicism?**

The “Great Man” view of history, often taught in high school textbooks, tells history in terms of the great accomplishments and actions of powerful men, including kings, presidents, and war heroes. New Historicism recognizes that history as we know it is an interpretation of events that have happened, so it can never be objective. History is always told through a historian’s perspective, in which he or she chooses what events are important and which figures are necessary to include in these events. In this

way, historical works must be read and interpreted with such ideas in mind. New Historicists also rely on all different kinds of cultural texts to interpret history and often pay attention to the lives of ordinary people.