AP English 11
Locating, Reading and Interpreting Literary Criticism

Strengthening your Argument with Secondary Sources, or Literary Criticism:

Literary criticism is an extension of interpreting. One reader writes down his or her views on what a particular work of literature means so that others can respond to that interpretation. The critic’s specific purpose may be to make value judgments on a work, to explain his or her interpretation of the work, or to provide other readers with relevant historical or biographical information. The critic’s general purpose, in most cases, is to enrich the reader’s understanding of the literary work. Critics typically engage in dialogue or debate with other critics, using the views of other critics to develop their own points. Unfortunately, when critics assume that their readers are already familiar with previous criticism, the argument may be difficult to follow.

Why Is Criticism Important?

As a reader of literature, you may find the views of others very helpful in developing your own interpretations. When you write an essay about literature, you will also find criticism helpful for supporting your points. But criticism should never be a substitute for your own original views—only in very rare cases would an assignment require you to summarize a critical work without including your interpretation of the literature. Besides being useful, good literary criticism can be fun in itself, like listening to and participating in a lively discussion among friends. By reading the critic, you add yet another point of view to yours and the author’s.

Some information for this handout was taken from the Purdue University website: owl.english.purdue.edu

Finding Reputable Literary Criticism (don’t just Google!)

**Directions:** Did you know that we have two fantastic online databases, accessible through our SMA library? First, on your iPad, open your Safari browser. Type in help/ and you should see the following options:

- **Bloom’s Literature**
- **Literary Reference Center Plus**

**Bloom’s Literature** and **Literary Reference Center Plus** are the two databases we’ll be working with. Tap on “Bloom’s Literature,” and on the next screen, tap on “Bloom’s Literature” again. Type in the name of your novel and/or author in the search bar. When the results appear, be sure to select the “Analyses and Criticism” tab. This will show you all the pieces of literary criticism for that novel. Some of them apply more than others, so take some time sifting through them. Next, try Literary Reference Center Plus. Type your author or title into the search bar. Along the left side of the screen, under “Source Types” and select “Literary Criticism.” Spend time sifting through the results. **Once you’ve selected an article from either database, write a 1-1.5 page abstract (sample on next page.)** This is due 9/8 and 9/9 (bl 3 and bl 7)
Example:
Title: “Dickens and the Female Terrorist: The Long Shadow of Madame Defarge”
Author: Theresa Mangum

Description of Essay: Mangum explores the significance of the female terrorist, focusing on Madame Defarge’s influence throughout history. She examines the complexity of Madame Defarge, asking readers to avoid the temptation to dismiss her as merely a one-dimensional villain.

Main Points:
Mangum begins her essay with the observation that, “the fearful revolutionary Madame Defarge dies, but is never, in any fashion, buried. Indeed, Madame Defarge lives on—often in curiously debased form” (143). She then states that she hopes to investigate what “readers of our century will make of the Terror that haunts the novel” in a post-9/11 world (144).

Exploring the origin of the word “terrorism,” Magnum finds a discrepancy between traditional definitions—“intended to strike with terror those against whom it is adopted” (144)—and more contemporary definitions—“terrorism is not an enemy in itself...Rather it is a method for achieving a goal...usually some kind of political change that is thwarted by other means” (145). She concludes, “The slippage between [these two definitions]...may help explain why A Tale of Two Cities treats Madame Defarge with an ambivalence that critics...do not” (145). Mangum traces how Dickens gives motivation to Madame Defarge, complicating our simple labeling of her as purely evil or one-dimensional. In fact, she states, “the ultimate punishment might be to decide that Madame Defarge plays only one role, that of terrorist. That judgment would position terrorism as a singular, static, totalizing plot that...devours all other plots (145). Mangum examines how Dickens provides more dimension to this character, yet it can be tempting to dismiss her a stereotypical, soulless terrorist.

Mangum explores the representation of the sansculotte figure (the peasant French person) in literature, history, and art from the nineteenth century. She discusses the circulation of images featuring “the devouring of heads and organs, the roasting of a baby, the transforming of the murdered into furniture, and the grotesque bodies of the sansculotte” (146). Dickens, however, subverts this simple depiction, giving her intriguing qualities and setting up parallels to Lucie Manette. At first, Madame Defarge serves as a uniting force among the peasants, as symbolized through her stable marriage. Then, Magnum posits that “Madame Defarge snips the thread binding her marriage to her political agenda” when her husband softens towards Dr. Manette (149).

Mangum looks that the historical marginalization and demonization of the sansculotte women during the French Revolution. She claims, “Like Madame Defarge herself, these women can be construed as, on one hand, proto-feminist visionaries who might have steered laws affecting gender equity in remarkably progressive directions, but also...as murderers” (152). Madame Defarge might even be considered a missionary: “She converts women to the cause of the Revolution; she provides work, however meaningless, to preserve women from starvation for a future, visionary life” (153). As she concludes, Magnum muses, “the novel seems to ask whether a perpetrator of terror can also be a victim” (157). While Carton clearly dies a martyr, does not Madame Defarge die a martyr of sorts as well?

My Thoughts
I enjoyed reading more about Madame Defarge—she remains one of the most memorable antagonists in literature for me. I agreed with Magnum for the most part, especially as she questioned how readily we celebrate Carton for his selflessness and yet condemn Madame Defarge for similar passion and sacrifice. It was interesting to read about the fear of these peasant women during the time period; Magnum states that at one point, men so feared them that “women were actually prohibited from gathering in the streets in groups of five or more” (151). The fear of women breaking from domestic roles as always been universal.