The Formalist Lens

- Formalism was developed in the 1930’s/40’s
- Theorized that each piece of art (of all types, including literature) had only one meaning per text, and that all the evidence to find that meaning lay within the piece itself.
- In literature, this means looking at exactly what is in the text and nothing more. You can’t consider the author’s life, the society they lived in, nothing. You can only consider what is in the text, such as literary devices, characters, setting, symbols and point of view
How to analyze a text through a formalist lens?

- Read the text and do a close reading
What’s a Close Reading?

- Going through the text and making notes about all of the literary elements
- Underline, highlight, color code the following literary elements
  * Repetition
  * Simile/Metaphors/ Hyperbole
  * Alliteration/Assonance
  * Paradox/Irony
  * Imagery/symbolism
  * Characters
  * Point of View
  * Themes
  * Structure
Questions to ask while making notes

1. What is the theme of the poem? What is the poet trying to say? What is the poem about?
2. What happens in the poem? Are conflicts or themes introduced? Resolved?
3. Who is the speaker? What is the “point of view” or perspective of the speaker? The perspective might be social, intellectual, political, or even physical.
4. What is the setting? What is the time and place? How does the poet make use of the physical description? Does it create a mood?
5. Are there any key statements or lines that indicate meaning? Look for one key line or symbol; however, the poet may make use of recurring symbols, actions, or motifs.
6. How does the sound or language contribute to the poem’s meaning? Does the rhythm affect what the poet is trying to convey? What kinds of words are used? Are there words with double meanings?
7. Does the poem refer to other literary works? For example, is there a Biblical reference or reference to another poem? How does the other work relate to the meaning?
8. What imagery is used? Does the poet use physical imagery or figures of speech, such as metaphors?
Forming an opinion based on your findings

- Once you have thoroughly examined all aspects of the text, you are ready to formulate an opinion AKA a thesis.
- Within a formalist critique, it’s best to express what you believe is the theme of the text and explain how the literary elements within the texts are working to reinforce the meaning.
- This way, you can explain how the “What” and the “How” of the text are mutually reinforcing.
Let’s Review
the Literary Elements
Literary Devices...
are like the icing on the cake.
Alliteration

- The repetition of initial consonant sounds.
- Robots rust repeatedly.
Allusion

Passing reference, without explicit identification, to a literary person, place, or event.

“I was surprised his nose was not growing like Pinocchio’s.”
Assonance

- The repetition of vowel sounds.
- "Hear the mellow wedding bells" - Edgar Allen Poe
Imagery

* Words or phrases that appeal to any sense or any combination of senses.

* “The winter evening settles down with smell of steaks in passageways. Six o'clock. The burnt-out ends of smoky days. And now a gusty shower wraps the grimy scraps of withered leaves about your feet and newspapers from vacant lots”

– T. S. Eliot
Foreshadowing

- A warning or clue of future events.
- An example of foreshadow is to introduce a weapon into a movie scene, which will later be used in combat.
Hyperbole

- Exaggeration for effect.
- “I’m so hungry I could eat a horse!”
Irony

- A statement or action that is the opposite of what is expected.

- A whaling ship being used to save marine animals after a tsunami.
Metaphor

A comparison between two objects with the intent of giving clearer meaning to one of them. Often forms of the "to be" verb are used, such as "is" or "was", to make the comparison.

*Calling the dependable father a rock.*
**Meter**

- The recurrence of a pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables.
- “Two households, both alike in dignity,
  In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,
  From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,
  Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.
  From forth the fatal loins of these two foes
  A pair of star-cross’d lovers take their life.”
  - Shakespeare *Romeo and Juliet*
Motif

A recurring image, word, phrase, object, symbol or action that unifies a literary work.

“The world is a beautiful place to be born into” – Ferlinghetti

The colour orange in the Life of Pi
Onomatopoeia

The use of words that imitate sound.

Snap, crackle, pop!
Oxymoron

- Description through a combination of opposites.
- Painfully beautiful, Walking dead
- "I can resist anything, except temptation." - Oscar Wilde
Paradox

• An insightful contradiction.

• In Shakespeare's Hamlet, the title character states "I must be cruel to be kind."
Pathetic Fallacy

- Nature reflects a character’s emotional state.
- He was miserable when it started to rain.
Personification

- A figure of speech that endows animals, ideas, or inanimate objects with human traits or abilities.

- The stars danced playfully in the moonlit sky.
Point-of-view

The author's point-of-view concentrates on the vantage point of the speaker, or "teller", of the story or poem.
Repetition

-The repeating of words, phrases, lines, or stanzas.

‘Because I do not hope to turn again
Because I do not hope
Because I do not hope to turn...”

'Ash-Wednesday' by T. S. Eliot
Rhyme scheme

- The sequence in which the rhyme occurs. The first end sound is represented as the letter "a"; the second is "b", etc.
- “But thou, contracted to thine own bright eyes,
  Feed'st thy light'st flame with self-substantial fuel,
  Making a famine where abundance lies,
  Thyself thy foe, to thy sweet self too cruel.” — Shakespearean Sonnet 1
Simile

A comparison between two objects using a specific word or comparison such as "like", "as", or "than".

*Her lips were as red as cherries.*
Stanza

- A grouping of two or more lines of a poem in terms of length, metrical form, or rhyme scheme.
- ‘Do not go gentle into that good night, Old age should burn and rave at close of day; Rage, rage against the dying of the light’ – Dylan Thomas