

## Critical Approaches to Reading

### Formalist Criticism

Position: Formalist critics focus on the formal elements of a literary work, such as language, structure and tone. To formalist critics such as **New Critics**, a poem, novel, or story is a work of art in itself that merits a close examination of the relationship between its form and meaning. A close reading of a work would consider such elements as diction, tone, figurative language, style, syntax, and rhetorical orientation. A formalist criticism bases its inquiry on the work itself, the text.

Consideration: Literary works are a form of communication and exist in a specific context. To isolate the work from the artist and his or her audience is to rob the reader of a means of understanding it as literature, which is a human and social activity.

### Biographical Criticism

Position: Events in the author's life, from specific experiences to attitudes, from places the author lived to people he or she knew, may appear directly or in veiled form in a literary work. Familiarity with these events can augment one's understanding of the work. Biographies, diaries, and letters provide an insight into the author's attitudes and experiences that help create a context for interpretation.

Consideration: It is dangerous to assume that an author cannot create a voice other than his or her own. Although some elements in a work may be biographical, many others may be fictional. While the author's attitudes may be of historical interest, critics of this approach argue that it is impossible to know the writer's intention. To formalist critics especially, biographical information is less valuable than the evidence provided by the text itself.

### Psychological Criticism

Position: Psychological approaches to literary criticism use the theories of Sigmund Freud to explore the motivations of characters and the symbolic meanings of events. Psychological explanations for the writer's motivations and the reader's responses to a work are also open to analysis. The critic considers dreams, unconscious desires, and sexual repression within the context of the Freudian view of the id, ego, and superego. According to the psychological criticism, a literary work is an expression of the conscious and unconscious needs, desires, ambitions, frustrations, and resentments of the author.

Considerations: To deny a writer the power to imagine and create diminishes literary art. All literature has a psychological dimension and relates to the emotions of both the writer and the reader. However, these emotional elements are not a case study, nor are they necessarily deviant or bizarre, even if the author's lifestyle has been unconventional. Psychological delving may not illuminate the work.

### Historical Criticism

Position: Literature expresses the values, issues, and concerns of the age which produced it. **Literary historians** go beyond the biographical information which focuses on the author, and instead consider the work in its historical context, including historical events, attitudes, social

roles, and expectations of authors, literature, and readers. **New Historicism** emphasizes the gap between a literary work's historical context and a modern reader's understanding of that period, however limited or distorted that understanding might be. These critics emphasize the difference between a contemporary audience's response and a modern reader's response to an event, a character's actions, or a literary approach to a subject, implying that a work exists in more than one historical context.

Consideration: Literature reflects its period, but the image it produces may be distorted. Literature is not history, and to assume that it simply presents historical truths is a disservice to both literature and history.

### **Sociological Criticism**

Two critical approaches, Marxist criticism and feminist criticism, examine social groups, relationships and values reflected in a literary work. **Marxist criticism** emphasizes the social milieu, especially economic issues and social injustices. Marxists have seen literature as a means of advancing their social and political goals; thus, they comment upon the degree to which a literary work fits their ideology, especially in its assumptions about race, class, and power. **Feminist criticism** examines the social relationships in a literary work, an author's life, or the context of a work in terms of the patriarchal social forces in the culture. In feminist criticism, attitudes toward women, the pressures on female characters, and the image of women which the work presents are all relevant critical issues. This approach also examines the power relationships of institutions which treat men and women differently or which have oppressed women.

Considerations: Literature often transcends propaganda. Insofar as sociological criticism clarifies a point of view or motivation, it offers a valuable perspective. If it serves propaganda more than critical inquiry, it becomes a political tool irrelevant to literary criticism.

### **Mythological criticism**

Position: Mythological or **archetypal criticism** attempts to identify patterns, characters, and images that evoke deep universal responses in readers. Unlike psychological criticism that examines the conscious and unconscious dimensions on an author's psyche, mythological critics interpret the hopes, fears, and expectations of entire cultures. Myths can explain cultural perceptions of nature, phases of life, values, and beliefs, and comparative mythology tracks recurrent patterns which occur in many different cultures. Mythological critics look for these patterns, or archetypes, in literature. These universal symbols evoke the universality of human experience, including initiations, scapegoats, meditative withdrawals, quests, rebirths, and feats of skill, courage, or magic.

Considerations: Mythological criticism can reveal the appeal of some literature and seem irrelevant to other works. Attempts to force archetypes can distort a work and lead to commentary with questionable relevance.

### **Deconstructionism**

Position: Literary works do not yield fixed, single meanings. Language is ambiguous, and there can be no absolute interpretation of the meaning of a work. Because literature always implies more than the author intends, a text can be deconstructed to yield alternative, contradictory

meanings which exist in relationship to other meanings. Deconstructionist critics try to destabilize the interpretations of a work rather than to establish them. Like New Critics, deconstructionists examine a text closely, but unlike New Critics, the deconstructionists look for competing meanings and identify the points in the text which generate those meanings.

Consideration: Deconstructionist readings can be quite controversial and the process, which should be based in the text, is often confused with reader-response criticism, which is very subjective.

### **Reader-Response Criticism**

Position: Unlike formalist critics, proponents of reader-response criticism believe that a work has no definitive meaning, that it is unfinished until it is read. Meaning is recreated by the reader in each reading. Reader-response criticism is highly subjective; events in a reader's experience determine which responses are relevant to the creative reading process. For example, if a reader is afraid of ghosts, he may assume that Shakespeare's character Hamlet is also motivated by fear of his father's ghost. Reader-response critics do not reject formalist approaches to criticism, but they insist that the complete meaning of a text should consider extrinsic issues, including a reader's preconceptions and personal responses.

Consideration: The reader's feeling about the work does not necessarily establish meaning. Reader-response criticism can be extremely divergent from the critical canon and can become a rationale for bizarre or mistaken readings defended on personal grounds.

### **Sources**

Manear, John. *Advanced Placement Poetry*. Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown, 1988.

Meyer, Michael. *The Bedford Introduction to Literature*. 3rd. ed. Boston: St. Martin's, 1993.

### **Websites on Critical Approaches**

"Literary Resources-Theory," maintained by Jack Lynch of Rutgers-Newark, provides a comprehensive list of other sites. <http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Lit/theory.html>

Dr. Kristi Siegel's site "Introduction to Modern Literary Theory" is accessible and current. <http://www.kristisiegel.com/theory.htm>

"Voice of the Shuttle" has a wide range of links, both general and specific. <http://vos.ucsb.edu/browse.asp?id=2718>

<http://www.literatureclassics.com/ancientpaths/litcrit.html>

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