

# **CRITICAL APPROACHES TO LITERATURE**

Described below are nine common critical approaches to the literature.

Quotations are from X.J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia's *Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, and Drama*, Sixth Edition (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), pages 1790-1818.

- \* **Formalist Criticism:** This approach regards literature as "a unique form of human knowledge that needs to be examined on its own terms." All the elements necessary for understanding the work are contained within the work itself. Of particular interest to the formalist critic are the elements of form-style, structure, tone, imagery, etc.-that are found within the text. A primary goal for formalist critics is to determine how such elements work together with the text's content to shape its effects upon readers.
- \* **Biographical Criticism:** This approach "begins with the simple but central insight that literature is written by actual people and that understanding an author's life can help readers more thoroughly comprehend the work." Hence, it often affords a practical method by which readers can better understand a text. However, a biographical critic must be careful not to take the biographical facts of a writer's life too far in criticizing the works of that writer: the biographical critic "focuses on explicating the literary work by using the insight provided by knowledge of the author's life.... [B]iographical data should amplify the meaning of the text, not drown it out with irrelevant material."
- \* **Historical Criticism:** This approach "seeks to understand a literary work by investigating the social, cultural, and intellectual context that produced it-a context that necessarily includes the artist's biography and milieu." A key goal for historical critics is to understand the effect of a literary work upon its original readers.
- \* **Gender Criticism:** This approach "examines how sexual identity influences the creation and reception of literary works." Originally an offshoot of feminist movements, gender criticism today includes a number of approaches, including the so-called "masculinist" approach recently advocated by poet Robert Bly. The bulk of gender criticism, however, is

feminist and takes as a central precept that the patriarchal attitudes that have dominated western thought have resulted, consciously or unconsciously, in literature "full of unexamined 'male-produced' assumptions." Feminist criticism attempts to correct this imbalance by analyzing and combatting such attitudes-by questioning, for example, why none of the characters in Shakespeare's play Othello ever challenge the right of a husband to murder a wife accused of adultery. Other goals of feminist critics include "analyzing how sexual identity influences the reader of a text" and "examin[ing] how the images of men and women in imaginative literature reflect or reject the social forces that have historically kept the sexes from achieving total equality."

- \* **Psychological Criticism:** This approach reflects the effect that modern psychology has had upon both literature and literary criticism. Fundamental figures in psychological criticism include Sigmund Freud, whose "psychoanalytic theories changed our notions of human behavior by exploring new or controversial areas like wish-fulfillment, sexuality, the unconscious, and repression" as well as expanding our understanding of how "language and symbols operate by demonstrating their ability to reflect unconscious fears or desires"; and Carl Jung, whose theories about the unconscious are also a key foundation of mythological criticism (see below). Psychological criticism has a number of approaches, but in general, it usually employs one (or more) of three approaches:
  1. An investigation of "the creative process of the artist: what is the nature of literary genius and how does it relate to normal mental functions?"
  2. The psychological study of a particular artist, usually noting an author's biographical circumstances affect or influence their motivations and/or behavior.
  3. The analysis of fictional characters using the language and methods of psychology.
- \* **Sociological Criticism:** This approach "examines literature in the cultural, economic and political context in which it is written or received," exploring the relationships between the artist and society. Sometimes it examines the artist's society to better understand the author's literary works; other times, it may examine the representation of such societal elements within the literature itself. One influential type of sociological criticism is Marxist criticism, which focuses on the economic and political elements of art, often emphasizing the ideological content of literature; because Marxist criticism often argues that all art

is political, either challenging or endorsing (by silence) the status quo, it is frequently evaluative and judgmental, a tendency that "can lead to reductive judgment, as when Soviet critics rated Jack London better than William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, Edith Wharton, and Henry James, because he illustrated the principles of class struggle more clearly."

Nonetheless, Marxist criticism "can illuminate political and economic dimensions of literature other approaches overlook."

\* **Mythological Criticism:** This approach emphasizes "the recurrent universal patterns underlying most literary works." Combining the insights from anthropology, psychology, history, and comparative religion, mythological criticism "explores the artist's common humanity by tracing how the individual imagination uses myths and symbols common to different cultures and epochs." One key concept in mythological criticism is the archetype, "a symbol, character, situation, or image that evokes a deep universal response," which entered literary criticism from Swiss psychologist Carl Jung. According to Jung, all individuals share a "'collective unconscious,' a set of primal memories common to the human race, existing below each person's conscious mind"-often deriving from primordial phenomena such as the sun, moon, fire, night, and blood, archetypes according to Jung "trigger the collective unconscious." Another critic, Northrop Frye, defined archetype in a more limited way as "a symbol, usually an image, which recurs often enough in literature to be recognizable as an element of one's literary experience as a whole." Regardless of the definition of archetype they use, mythological critics tend to view literary works in the broader context of works sharing a similar pattern.

\* **Reader-Response Criticism:** This approach takes as a fundamental tenet that "literature" exists not as an artifact upon a printed page but as a transaction between the physical text and the mind of a reader. It attempts "to describe what happens in the reader's mind while interpreting a text" and reflects that reading, like writing, is a creative process. According to reader-response critics, literary texts do not "contain" a meaning; meanings derive only from the act of individual readings. Hence, two different readers may derive completely different interpretations of the same literary text; likewise, a reader who re-reads a work years later may find the work shockingly different. Reader-response criticism, then, emphasizes how "religious, cultural, and social values affect readings; it also overlaps with gender criticism in exploring how men and women read

the same text with different assumptions." Though this approach rejects the notion that a single "correct" reading exists for a literary work, it does not consider all readings permissible: "Each text creates limits to its possible interpretations."

- \* Deconstructionist Criticism: This approach "rejects the traditional assumption that language can accurately represent reality." Deconstructionist critics regard language as a fundamentally unstable medium-the words "tree" or "dog," for instance, undoubtedly conjure up different mental images for different people-and therefore, because literature is made up of words, literature possesses no fixed, single meaning. According to critic Paul de Man, deconstructionists insist on "the impossibility of making the actual expression coincide with what has to be expressed, of making the actual signs [i.e., words] coincide with what is signified." As a result, deconstructionist critics tend to emphasize not what is being said but how language is used in a text. The methods of this approach tend to resemble those of formalist criticism, but whereas formalists' primary goal is to locate unity within a text, "how the diverse elements of a text cohere into meaning," deconstructionists try to show how the text "deconstructs," "how it can be broken down ... into mutually irreconcilable positions." Other goals of deconstructionists include (1) challenging the notion of authors' "ownership" of texts they create (and their ability to control the meaning of their texts) and (2) focusing on how language is used to achieve power, as when they try to understand how some interpretations of a literary work come to be regarded as "truth."

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