

# Literary Criticism: An Overview of Approaches

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## The Three-fold Purpose of Criticism:

- To help us solve a problem in the reading.
  - To help us sift between and resolve conflicting readings.
  - To enable us craft interpretative, yet scholarly judgments about literature.
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**1. Historical / Biographical Approach:** *Historical / Biographical critics see works as the reflection of an author's life and times (or of the characters' life and times). H/B approach deems it necessary to know about the author and the political, economical, and sociological context of his times in order to truly understand the work(s).*

**Advantages:** This approach works well for some works--like those of Alexander Pope, John Dryden, and Milton--which are obviously political in nature. It also is necessary to take a historical approach in order to place allusions in their proper classical, political, or biblical background.

**Disadvantages:** New Critics refer to the historical / biographical critic's belief that the meaning or value of a work may be determined by the author's intention as "the intentional fallacy." Thus, art is reduced to the level of biography rather than universal.

## A Checklist of Historical Critical Questions:

- When was the work written? When was it published? How was it received by the critics and public and why?
- What does the work's reception reveal about the standards of taste and value during the time it was published and reviewed?
- What social attitudes and cultural practices related to the action of the work were prevalent during the time the work was written and published?
- What kinds of power relationships does the work describe, reflect, or embody?
- How do the power relationships reflected in the literary work manifest themselves in the cultural practices and social institutions prevalent during the time the work was written and published?
- To what extent can we understand the past as it is reflected in the literary work? To what extent does the work reflect differences from the ideas and values of its time?

## Checklist of Biographical Critical Questions:

- What influences—people, ideas, movements, events—evident in the writer's life does the work reflect?
- To what extent are the events described in the work a direct transfer of what happened in the writer's actual life?
- What modifications of the actual events has the writer made in the literary work? For what possibly purposes?
- What are the effects of the differences between actual events and their literary transformation in the poem, story, play, or essay?
- What has the author revealed in the work about his/her characteristic modes of thought, perception, or emotion? What place does this work have in the artist's literary development and career?

**2. Moral / Philosophical Approach:** *Moral / philosophical critics believe that the larger purpose of literature is to teach morality and to probe philosophical issues. Practitioners include Matthew Arnold (works must have "high seriousness"), Plato (literature must exhibit moralism and utilitarianism), and Horace (literature should be "delightful and instructive").*

**Advantages:** This approach is useful for such works as Alexander Pope's "An Essay on Man," which presents an obvious moral philosophy. It is also useful when considering the themes of works (for example, man's inhumanity to man in Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn). Finally, it does not view literature merely as "art" isolated from all moral implications; it recognizes that literature can affect readers, whether subtly or directly, and that the message of a work--and not just the decorous vehicle for that message--is important.

**Disadvantages:** Detractors argue that such an approach can be too "judgmental." Some believe literature should be judged primarily (if not solely) on its artistic merits, not its moral or philosophical content.

### Checklist of Moral/Didactic Critical Questions:

- What enduring truth is revealed in the theme of this work?
- How are the actions of the protagonist rewarded and the actions of the antagonist punished?

### 3. Formalism / New Criticism:

**Formalism** [http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/virtualit/poetry/critical\\_define/crit\\_form.html](http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/virtualit/poetry/critical_define/crit_form.html)

**New Criticism** [http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/virtualit/poetry/critical\\_define/crit\\_newcrit.html](http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/virtualit/poetry/critical_define/crit_newcrit.html)

*A formalistic approach to literature, once called New Criticism, involves a **close reading of the text**. Formalistic critics believe that all information essential to the interpretation of a work must be found within the work itself; there is no need to bring in outside information about the history, politics, or society of the time, or about the author's life. Formalistic critics spend much time analyzing irony, paradox, imagery, and metaphor. They are also interested in the work's setting, characters, symbols, and point of view.*

#### Terms Used in New Criticism:

- **Tension** - the integral unity of the poem which results from the resolution of opposites, often in irony or paradox
- **Intentional fallacy** - the belief that the meaning or value of a work may be determined by the author's intention
- **Affective fallacy** - the belief that the meaning or value of a work may be determined by its affect on the reader
- **External form** - rhyme scheme, meter, stanza form, etc.
- **Objective correlative** - originated by T.S. Eliot, this term refers to a collection of objects, situations, or events that instantly evoke a particular emotion.

**Advantages:** This approach can be performed without much research, and it emphasizes the value of literature apart from its context (in effect makes literature timeless). ***Virtually all critical approaches must begin here.***

**Disadvantages:** The text is seen in isolation. Formalism ignores the context of the work. It cannot account for allusions. It tends to reduce literature to little more than a collection of rhetorical devices.

### A Checklist of Formalistic Critical Questions:

- How is the work structured or organized? How does it begin? Where does it go next? How does it end? What is the work's plot? How is its plot related to its structure?
- What is the relationship of each part of the work to the work as a whole? How are the parts related to one another?
- Who is narrating or telling what happens in the work? How is the narrator, speaker, or character revealed to readers? How do we come to know and understand this figure?
- Who are the major and minor characters, what do they represent, and how do they relate to one another?
- What are the time and place of the work—it's setting? How is the setting related to what we know of the characters and their actions? To what extent is the setting symbolic?
- What kind of language does the author use to describe, narrate, explain, or otherwise create the world of the literary work? More specifically, what images, similes, metaphors, symbols appear in the work? What is their function? What meanings do they convey?

**4. Psychological Approach:** *Psychological critics view works through the lens of psychology. They look either at the psychological motivations of the characters or of the authors themselves, although the former is generally considered a more respectable approach. Most frequently, psychological critics apply Freudian and/or Jungian (archetypes) psychology to works.*

#### (a) Freudian Approach:

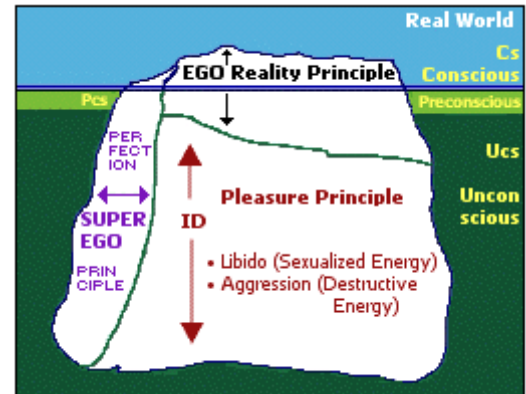
[http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/virtualit/poetry/critical\\_define/crit\\_psych.html](http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/virtualit/poetry/critical_define/crit_psych.html)

A Freudian approach often includes pinpointing the influences of a character's psyche (Greek for "soul"), which consists of the:

- **Id** (reservoir of libido or pleasure principle in the unconscious)
- **Superego** (the moral censoring agency and repository of conscience/pride that protects society)
- **Ego** (the rational governing agent of the unconscious that protects the individual)

Freudian critics steer toward the sexual implications of symbols and imagery, since Freud theorized that all human behavior (drives) derives from libido/sexual energy.

- **Concave Images**, such as ponds, flowers, cups, and caves = female symbols.
- **Convex Images**, such as skyscrapers, submarines, obelisks, etc. = male symbols
- **Actions**, such as dancing, riding, and flying = sexual pleasure.
- **Water** = birth, the female principle, the maternal, the womb, and the death wish.
- **Oedipus complex** = a boy's unconscious rivalry with his father for the love of his mother
- **The Electra Complex** = a girl's unconscious rivalry with her mother for the love of her father
- Critics may also refer to Freud's psychology of child development, which includes the **oral stage (eating)**, the **anal stage (elimination)**, and the **genital (reproduction)**.



**Advantages:** A useful tool for understanding some works, in which characters manifest clear psychological issues. Like the biographical approach, knowing something about a writer's psychological make up can give us insight into his work.

**Disadvantages:** Psychological criticism can turn a work into little more than a psychological case study, neglecting to view it as a piece of art. Critics sometimes attempt to diagnose long dead authors based on their works, which is perhaps not the best evidence of their psychology. Critics tend to see sex in everything, exaggerating this aspect of literature. Finally, some works do not lend themselves readily to this approach.

#### Checklist of Psychological Critical Questions

- What connections can you make between your knowledge of an author's life and the behavior and motivations of characters in his or her work?
- How does your understanding of the characters, their relationships, their actions, and their motivations in a literary work help you better understand the mental world and imaginative life, or the actions and motivations of the author?
- How does a particular literary work—its images, metaphors, and other linguistic elements—reveal the psychological motivations of its characters or the psychological mindset of its author?
- To what extent can you employ the concepts of Freudian psychoanalysis to understand the motivations of literary characters?
- What kinds of literary works and what types of literary characters seem best suited to a critical approach that employs a psychological or psychoanalytical perspective? Why?
- How can a psychological or psychoanalytical approach to a particular work be combined with an approach from another critical perspective—for example, biographical, formalist, or feminist criticism?

#### (b) Jungian Approach: <http://www.sonoma.edu/users/d/daniels/Jungsum.html>

Jung is also an influential force in myth (archetypal) criticism. Psychological critics are generally concerned with his concept of the process of **individuation** (the process of discovering what makes one different from everyone else). Jung labeled three parts of the self:

- **Shadow** -- the darker, unconscious self; rarely surfaces, yet must be faced for totality of Self
- **Persona** -- the public personality/mask (particularly masculine)
- **Anima/Animus** -- a man's/woman's "soul image" (the negative that makes a composite whole)
- A **neurosis** occurs when someone fails to assimilate one of these unconscious components into his conscious and **projects** it on someone else. The persona must be flexible and be able to balance the components of the psyche.



**Mythological / Archetypal:** A mythological / archetypal approach to literature assumes that there is a collection of symbols, images, characters, and motifs (i.e., **archetypes**) that evokes a similar response in all people. According to the psychologist Carl Jung, mankind possesses a "**collective unconscious**" (a cosmic reservoir of human experience) that contains these archetypes and that is common to all of humanity. Myth critics identify these archetypal patterns and discuss how they function in the works. They believe that these archetypes are the source of much of literature's power.

## For Complete List of Archetypes See Handout on AP LIT website

**Advantages:** Provides a universalistic approach to literature and identifies a reason why certain literature may survive the test of time. It works well with works that are highly symbolic.

**Disadvantages:** Literature may become little more than a vehicle for archetypes, and this approach may ignore the “art” of literature.

### Checklist of Mythological Critical Questions

- What incidents in the work seem common or familiar enough as actions that they might be considered symbolic or archetypal? Are there any journeys, battles, falls, reversals of fortune, etc.?
- What kinds of character types appear in the work? How might they be classified?
- What creatures, elements of nature, or man-made objects playing a role in the work might be considered symbolic?
- What changes do the characters undergo? How can those changes be characterized or named? To what might they be related or compared?
- What religious or quasi-religious traditions might the work’s story, characters, elements, or objects be compared to or affiliated with? Why?

### 5. Feminist Approach:

[http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/virtualit/poetry/critical\\_define/crit\\_femin.html](http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/virtualit/poetry/critical_define/crit_femin.html)

*Feminist criticism is concerned with the impact of gender on writing and reading. It usually begins with a critique of patriarchal culture. It is concerned with the place of female writers in the canon. Finally, it includes a search for a feminine theory or approach to texts. Feminist criticism is political and often revisionist. Feminists often argue that male fears are portrayed through female characters. They may argue that gender determines everything, or just the opposite: that all gender differences are imposed by society, and gender determines nothing.*

#### Elaine Showalter's Theory:

In A Literature of Their Own, Elaine Showalter argued that literary subcultures all go through three major phases of development. For literature by or about women, she labels these stages the Feminine, Feminist, and Female:

- ♀ **Feminine** Stage -- involves “imitation of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition” and “internalization of its standards.”
- ♀ **Feminist** Stage -- involves “protest against these standards and values and advocacy of minority rights....”
- ♀ **Female** Stage -- this is the “phase of *self-discovery*, a turning inwards freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity.”



**Advantages:** Women have been underrepresented in the traditional canon, and a feminist approach to literature attempts to redress this problem.

**Disadvantages:** Feminists turn literary criticism into a political battlefield and overlook the merits of works they consider “patriarchal.” When arguing for a distinct feminine writing style, they tend to relegate women’s literature to a ghetto status; this in turn prevents female literature from being naturally included in the literary canon. The feminist approach is often too theoretical.

### Checklist of Feminist Critical Questions

- To what extent does the representation of women (and men) in the work reflect the place and time in which the work was written?
- How are the relationships between men and women or those between members of the same sex presented in the work? What roles do men and women assume and perform and with what consequences?
- Does the author present the work from within a predominantly male or female sensibility? Why might this have been done, and with what effects?
- How do the facts of the author’s life relate to the presentation of men and women in the work? To their relative degrees of power?
- How do other works by the author correspond to this one in their depiction of the power relationships between men and women?

## 6. Marxist Criticism:

[http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/virtualit/poetry/critical\\_define/crit\\_marx.html](http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/virtualit/poetry/critical_define/crit_marx.html)

*Marxist criticism is a type of criticism in which literary works are viewed as the product of work and whose practitioners emphasize the role of class and ideology as they reflect, propagate, and even challenge the prevailing social order. Rather than viewing texts as repositories for hidden meanings, Marxist critics view texts as material products to be understood in broadly historical terms. In short, literary works are viewed as a product of work (and hence of the realm of production and consumption we call economics).*

### Core Marxist Principles & Basic Terms:

**Proletariat:** that class of society, which does not have ownership of the means of production.

**Bourgeoisie:** wealthy class that rules society.

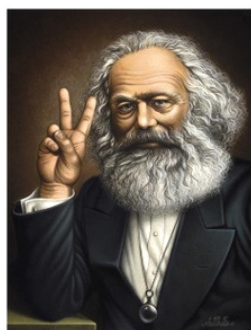
**Power of the Base:** Marx believed that the economic means of production in a society (**the base**) both creates and controls all human institutions and ideologies (**the superstructure**). This superstructure includes all social and legal institutions, all political and educational systems, all religions, and all art. These ideologies develop as a result of the economic means of production, not the reverse.

**Alienation** -- Marx believed that capitalist society created three forms of alienation:

- First, the worker is alienated from what he produces.
- Second, the worker is alienated from himself; only when he is not working does he feel truly himself.
- Finally, in capitalist society people are alienated from each other; that is, in a competitive society people are set against other people.
- Marx believed that the solution was communism, which would allow the development of our full "potentialities as a human."
- For Marx, the possibility that one may give up ownership of one's own -- one's capacity to transform the world -- is tantamount to being alienated from one's own nature; it is a spiritual loss.

### Dialectical Materialism

- Marx believed that communism was a historical inevitability. Society had progressed from one economic system to another—from feudalism to capitalism, for example.
- The contradictions of each system led to its collapse. As history advanced, the failures of the preceding system would lead to the adoption of a new one.
- Marx's version was that human history was a series of steps towards a perfect economic arrangement—an inevitable march. According to Marx, capitalism was the result of conflict between lords and serfs in feudal society and between guild masters and journeymen in precapitalistic society. The resulting conflicts created the capitalist class or bourgeoisie, which owns the means of production, and the wage workers or proletariat class, which has to sell its labor to survive.
- Derived from Hegel's dialectic, the belief that truth (synthesis) emerges from a comparison of a thesis and anti-thesis.



### Checklist of Marxist/Cultural Criticism:

- What is the economic status of the characters?
- What happens to them as a result of this status?
- How do they fare against economic and political odds?
- What other conditions stemming from their class does the writer emphasize? (e.g., poor education, poor nutrition, poor health care, inadequate opportunity)
- To what extent does the work fail by overlooking the economic, social and political implications of its material?
- In what other ways does economic determinism affect the work? How should readers consider the story in today's modern economic setting (nationally, globally, etc.)?

**7. Cultural Criticism:** *Cultural Studies from the beginning has shared concerns and methods of analysis with Marxist theory. One shared assumption is that culture is dialectical in nature: we make culture and we are made by culture. Because cultural processes are intimately connected with social relations, especially class, gender, and racial structural divisions, culture is understood to involve power and helps maintain and create inequalities within and between social groups. As part of the dialectic of culture, resistance is always present in that a dominant cultural process will generate its own critical response. For this reason Cultural Studies emphasizes the importance of analyzing the dialectical play between resistance and incorporation of cultural production. And again like Marxist criticism, Cultural Studies focuses on the relationship between social practices commonly separated so that culture is seen as a whole way of life, a social totality.*