

AP Literature Literary Theories and Methods for Criticism

Historical / Biographical Approach:

Definition: Historical / Biographical critics see works as the reflection of an author's life and times (or of the characters' life and times). They believe it is necessary to know about the author and the political, economical, and sociological context of his times in order to truly understand his works.

Advantages: This approach works well for some works--like those of Alexander Pope, John Dryden, and Milton--which are obviously political in nature. One must know Milton was blind, for instance, for "On His Blindness" to have any meaning. And one must know something about the Exclusion Bill Crisis to appreciate John Dryden's "Absalom and Achitophel." 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." They believe that this approach tends to reduce art to the level of biography and make it relative (to the times) rather than universal.

Moral / Philosophical Approach:

Definition: Moral / philosophical critics believe that the larger purpose of literature is to teach morality and to probe philosophical issues.

Advantages: This approach is useful for such works as Alexander Pope's "An Essay on Man," which does present 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.

Mimetic Approach:

Definition: This can be closely related to the moral / philosophical approach, but is somewhat broader. Mimetic critics ask how well the work of literature accords with the real world. Is it accurate? Is it correct? Is it moral? Does it show how people really act? As such, mimetic criticism can include some forms of moral / philosophical criticism, psychological criticism, and feminist criticism.

Formalism / New Criticism

Definition: 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 (presumably) do not view works through the lens of feminism, psychology, mythology, or any other such standpoint, and they are not interested in the work's affect on the reader. 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.

Psychological Approach

Definition: 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 psychology to works, but other approaches (such as a Jungian approach) also exist.

Freudian Approach:

A Freudian approach often includes pinpointing the influences of a character's id (the instinctual, pleasure seeking part of the mind), superego (the part of the mind that represses the id's impulses) and the ego (the part of the mind that controls but does not repress the id's impulses, releasing them in a healthy way). Freudian critics like to point out the sexual implications of symbols and imagery, since Freud believed that all human behavior is motivated by sexuality. They tend to see concave images, such as ponds, flowers, cups, and caves as female symbols; whereas objects that are longer than they are wide are usually seen as phallic symbols. Dancing, riding, and flying are associated with sexual pleasure. Water is usually associated with birth, the female principle, the maternal, the womb, and the death wish. Freudian critics occasionally discern the presence of an Oedipus complex (a boy's unconscious rivalry with his father for the love of his mother) in the male characters of certain works, such as Hamlet. They may also refer to Freud's psychology of child development, which includes the oral stage, the anal stage, and the genital stage.

Jungian Approach:

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: the shadow, or the darker, unconscious self (usually the villain in literature); the persona, or a man's social personality (usually the hero); and the anima, or a man's "soul image" (usually the heroine). 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.

Advantages: It can be a useful tool for understanding some works, such as Henry James *The Turn of the Screw*, in which characters obviously have 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.

Additionally, literary theory is an attempt to understand the various ways that different people read texts. Yes, we all know that not everyone “interprets” a book, poem, or even a song the same way. Theory gives readers a chance to view a text with a so-called different set of lenses (think outside the box—makes for stronger analysis).

This is merely an introduction to theory so I am just going to provide you with a few of the more common schools of criticism. Remember most of these theories are quite detailed so this is just a very brief overview of their main ideas and some theories have been combined to keep things simple.

Feminist/Gender Criticism (they are separate but I’m simplifying)

View society in a “patriarchal” and “heterosexual” way, which has hindered or prevented women and homosexuals from realizing their true potential. Claim that both groups are viewed negatively, inferior, or as “the other.”

- Consider the gender/orientation of the author, characters
- What roles does gender or sexuality play in this work? (Examine power relations)
- Look for sexual stereotypes either reinforced or contradicted
- Imagine yourself as the opposite gender reading the text

Marxist Criticism

Views society based on the economic and cultural theory of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Assumes that each society is made up of a set of concepts, beliefs, values, and ways of thinking influenced by economic and class structures.

- Consider who has the power/money and who doesn’t
- What role does power, money, or class play in this work?
- What happens as a result in differences in power/money?
- Relate context of work to social-class of author and/or time period

Psychoanalytic Criticism

Views text as an expression of the personality, state of mind, feelings, and desires of its author. Looks for the distinction between conscious and unconscious motives of characters and author.

- Consider the author’s personality to explain and interpret a text
- What repressed material is expressed in imagery or symbols?
- What psychological theories are present in the characters (Oedipal complex, obsessive compulsive, sexual repression, denial, guilt)?

New Criticism/Structuralism

Views text as existing independently. Meaning is discovered by doing a close reading and not by examining outside sources.

- Focuses on the meanings and interactions of words, figures of speech, and symbols.
- Looks for complex interrelations and ambiguities within a text.
- Analyzes how parallels are established and create a unity within the text

Narratology/Archetypes: A form of Structuralism that focuses on the structure of stories. Identifies 31 actions that a story can contain and claims all stories pick from this list. Also focuses on the specific character types that are repeated within all stories—hero, villain, trickster, orphan, mentor etc.

Deconstruction/Post-Structuralism (definitely the most confusing one)

Created by some very intelligent or very disturbed people who view literature as having no meaning because language has no meaning. Basically, you can never really know what the “meaning” of a story is because words are so abstract.

Historical Criticism/Post-Colonial

Views text as a closely related to the time during which an author wrote. Focused on the social, political, economic, cultural, and/or intellectual climate of the time. Examines how other cultures are viewed in terms of an overpowering Western literature base.

- Looks at issues of colonization and imperialism
- Rejects the idea of marginalized people as “others”
- Celebrates “hybridity” (existing in two cultures at once)

Modernism/Post-Modernism:

Modernism is a rejection of traditional forms of literature (chronological plots, continuous narratives, closed endings etc.) in favor of experimental forms. They have a nostalgia for the past that they feel is lost so Modernist texts often include multiple allusions. Post-Modernists follow the same principles but celebrate the new forms of fragmentation rather than lamenting them.

- Look for ironies within a text
- Analyze fragmentation and a mixing of genres and forms
- Blurs the line between “high” literature (classics) and popular literature (NY Times Bestsellers)

Okay, now that I’ve thoroughly confused you let’s try it and you’ll see it’s actually kind of fun. Let’s analyze *The Lion King* a.k.a. *Hamlet* with a few of these theories.

Feminist/Gender: Can be viewed as the helpless role females have in society. The female lions are used to provide food and care for the young yet it is the males that have all the power. When Mufasa dies his power transfers to either his son or his brother. His wife is never even considered. Nala is also clearly “stronger” than Simba yet she is considered inferior.

Marxist: Can be viewed as the upper class (lions) trying to maintain power over an unhappy lower class (hyenas). The lower class resents the privileges of better food and hunting grounds that the upper class maintains. This conflict causes a rebellion, which disrupts the normal social order causing chaos and destruction.

Psychoanalytic: Can be viewed as a classic case of sibling rivalry—Scar is savagely jealous of his much stronger and might I say better looking older brother. Can also be viewed as the classic struggle to overcome feelings of guilt or inadequacy—both of which Simba has after the death of his father.

Narratology: Simba represents the classic hero quest. Simba suffers from a loss of a father figure and must go off on a journey to grow into his destiny. During his journey he meets tricksters (Timon/Pumba) who also act as his helpers and finds a mentor (crazy monkey with a stick). Nala also acts as the herald as she upsets the sleepy equilibrium in which the Simba has lived and starts his growth. He then has enough strength (mental and physical) to overcome the villain and restore everything to order.