Literary Criticism & Theory

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| Criticism & Theory | Definition | Key Questions |
| Formalist or “New Criticism” | In analyzing a work, the only evidence worth considering is that which is intrinsic to the text (within the work itself), and nothing extrinsic (outside elements like historical context of author’s life) need be considered.  Formalist critics seek to understand how an author or poet employs figures of speech, symbolism, narrative frames and the other literary tools to achieve an artistic “unity of effect.”  Formalist criticism is achieved through a **close reading** of a text. | * How does the work use literary devices to develop meaning? * How are the various parts of the work interconnected? |
| Biographical Criticism | The biographical critic studies events in the life of the author in order to determine how they may have influenced the author’s work. | * What real life event inspired the author to create a given plot twist or character? * Where does real life leave off and the imagination take over? |
| Historical Criticism | Historical critics examine time during which the text was written.  They consider the politics and social movements prevalent during the time period in order to determine how the literature under examination is both the product and shaper of society. | * How did the text in question influence contemporary events. * How did contemporary events influence the author’s creative choices? |

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| Feminist Criticism | The primary agenda of Feminist critics is to investigate how a literary work either serves or to challenges a patriarchal (male dominated) view of society.  They maintain that literature should be analyzed with the goal of explaining how the text exemplifies or reveals important insights about sex roles and society’s structure.  They point out that the traditional “canon” – those works long deemed to be the best that has been thought and said in human culture – tend to define females as “other,” or as an object, compared to the male’s privileged subject status.  Feminist criticism focuses on social relationships, including the patterns of thought, behavior, values, enfranchisement and power between the sexes. | * How does the text mirror or question a male-dominated (phallocentric) view of reality? |
| Marxist Criticism | This is criticism inspired by the historical, economic and sociological theory of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.  Its focus is on the connections between the content or form of a literary work and the economic, class, social or ideological factors that have shaped and determined it.  Marxist criticism is preoccupied with matters of class status, economic conditions, what is published and what is repressed in the literary marketplace, the preferences of the reading public, and so forth. | * Who has the power/money in society? * Who does not? * What happens as a result? |
| Psychoanalytical Criticism | This approach is based on the work of psychologist Sigmund Freud. He believed that human behavior is influenced by unconscious needs, fears, desires, and conflicts of which they are unaware. He also believed that people develop defenses to protect themselves from psychological harm through defense mechanisms like repression, denial, regression, displacement, stc.  Freud thought the mind was divided into three parts:   * The Id – a humans basic, primitive drives (sexual and aggressive * Superego – our internalized values and social rules. * Ego – the mediator, operates on the reality principle. The ego tries to meet the needs of the id in a way that does not cause trouble | * What is the text telling us about what it means to be a human being? * Would you act like the main character in the same circumstances? |
| Archetypal or Mythological Criticism | This approach to literature stems from the notion that texts ultimately point out the universality of human experience.  Built largely on the psychology of Carl Jung, Archetypal criticism contends that there are certain shared memories that exist in the collective unconscious of the human species, a storehouse of images and patterns, vestigial traces of which inhere in all human beings and which find symbolic expression in all human art, including its literature. (Think, for example, of the spontaneous associations you have while watching a sunset. They are not unique.)  Practitioners such as Northrop Frye and Joseph Campbell have discerned a complex and comprehensive correspondence between the basic story patterns of humans – comedy, romance, tragedy and irony – and the myths and archetypal patterns associated with the seasonal cycle of spring, summer, fall and winter.  The death/rebirth theme is said to be the archetype of archetypes. | What universal patterns of human experience are evidenced and are being explored in the text? |
| Reader Response Theory | This theory notes that a literary text is not separate and closed-off; rather, its meaning is completed when the individual reader comes in contact with it and in the course of reading constructs a new version of what the text is saying.  Reader Response theory notes that reading is ultimately a personal and idiosyncratic activity.  For this very reason, this undoubtedly true “theory” does not qualify as a “critical lens” because it preeminently champions the undoubted right of each individual to his or her own opinion about a piece of writing without the need to justify or otherwise defend one’s perceptions.   In school, students are invited to respond to a text subjectively all the time.  This happens, for example, when teachers ask them to “make connections” between the text and their own experience and knowledge of the world.  Reader response is how most people spontaneously react to literature.  It is healthy, indispensable, and inherently subjective and, for that reason, not what we are trying to coach students to accomplish when writing a literary analysis paper. | How did you like the book? |