

# Literary Criticism

What is it?

# **Definition:**

**Literary criticism is the evaluation, analysis, description, or interpretation of literary works. It is usually in the form of a critical essay, but in-depth book reviews can sometimes be considered literary criticism. Criticism may examine a particular literary work, or may look at an author's writings as a whole.**

# New Criticism

**New Criticism** calls for "close reading," of "the work itself." It rejects the need to pay attention to the biography of the author or the society in which the book was written. Instead, the theme can be found through close focus and analysis, rather than through an analysis of the author.

New Criticism examines the relationships between a text's ideas and its form, between what a text says and the way it says it.

New Criticism attempts to be a science of literature, with a technical vocabulary (third-person, denouement, etc.).

***Meaning exists on the page.***

## **How Do I Participate in New Literary Criticism?**

Step 1: Read closely to understand the plot, development of characters, and other elements of fiction and style.

Step 2: Then ask questions about why the author made these choices.

Step 3: Make predictions (inferences) about what the author may be trying to teach the audience through the manipulation of these literary devices (theme). Determine how the manipulation of devices enhances the literature as a whole.

# **STOP!**

# **Time To Practice**

“First Confessions” and Review Centers

# Archetypal Literary Criticism

This approach is inspired by the work of Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell. It looks at archetypes in literature that seem to transcend time, place, and culture.

See the handout provided.

# Joseph Campbell's Monomyth

[Archetypal Criticism Slideshow](#)

# Feminist Literary Criticism

Feminist criticism is concerned with "...the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforce or undermine the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women" (Tyson). This school of theory looks at how aspects of our culture are inherently patriarchal (male dominated) and "...this critique strives to expose the explicit and implicit misogyny in male writing about women" (Richter 1346). Feminist criticism is also concerned with less obvious forms of marginalization such as the exclusion of women writers from the traditional literary canon: "...unless the critical or historical point of view is feminist, there is a tendency to under-represent the contribution of women writers" (Tyson 82-83).



# Questions To Ask While You Read:

- How is the relationship between men and women portrayed?
- What are the power relationships between men and women (or characters assuming male/female roles)?
- How are male and female roles defined?
- What constitutes masculinity and femininity and How do characters embody these traits?
- Do characters take on traits from opposite genders? How so? How does this change others' reactions to them?
- What does the work reveal about the operations (economically, politically, socially, or psychologically) of patriarchy?

# Marxist Literary Criticism

Marxist Literary Criticism is interested in:  
the material dialectic: a belief that material realities of the economic base determine historical change more than the ideals associated with politics, religion, or philosophy. The tensions between the upper, middle, and lower classes leads to contradictions, tensions, and eventually revolution.

## **In essence, Marxists believe that:**

“A work of literature is not a result of divine inspiration or pure artistic endeavor, but that it arises out of the economic and ideological circumstances surrounding its creation. For Marxist critics, works of literature often mirror the creator's own place in society, and they interpret most texts in relation to their relevance regarding issues of class struggle as depicted in a work of fiction” (Witalik, 2).

# Ask Yourself:

- Whom does it benefit if the work or effort is accepted/successful/believed, etc.?
- What is the social class of the author?
- Which class does the work claim to represent?
- What values does it reinforce? What values does it subvert?
- What conflict can be seen between the values the work champions and those it portrays?
- What social classes do the characters represent?
- How do characters from different classes interact or conflict?
- What are the political implications of this text?

# Psychoanalytic Criticism

Psychoanalytic theory is using an approach employed by Sigmund Freud and other theorists to interpret texts. It assumes that the work is a product of the author's own neurosis. In studying the work, you are studying the mind of the author. Another approach includes viewing the text as a case study and psychoanalyzing the characters.

# Psychological Theories

Human Motivation

# HISTORICAL / BIOGRAPHICAL CRITICISM

Until well into the 20th century, much of literary study was based on the assumption that to understand a work you need to understand the author's social background, the author's life, ideas circulating during the time the author was writing, what other works influenced the creation of the one under examination, and so on. Most book introductions still offer this kind of material.

Valuable literature, therefore, is that which tells us truths about the period which produced them. We are getting, according to this approach, a vision of human nature or the world in general as filtered through an author's individual insight and perceptions.

One obstacle with this assumption is that it requires a crash course in matters falling outside the work itself: historical, cultural, and biographical details surrounding the author's life.

# Ask Yourself

- What language/characters/events present in the work reflect the time in which and for which the text was written?
- How are such events interpreted and presented?
- How are events' interpretation and presentation a product of the culture of the author? Does the work's presentation support or condemn the culture of the time?
- How does this portrayal support or criticize the leading political figures or movements of the day?
- How does the literary text function as part of a continuum with other historical/cultural texts from the same period?
- How can we use a literary work to better understand the culture in which and for which the text was written?
- How does the work consider traditionally marginalized populations?