



Literary Theories

A Sampling of Critical Lenses



Literary theories were developed as a means to understand the various ways people read texts. The proponents of each theory believe their theory is *the* theory, but most of us interpret texts according to the “rules” of several different theories at a time. All literary theories are lenses through which we can see texts. There is nothing to say that one is better than another or that you should read according to any of them, but it is sometimes fun to “decide” to read a text with one in mind because you often end up with a whole new perspective on your reading.

What follows is a summary of some of the most common schools of literary theory. These descriptions are extremely cursory, and none of them fully explains what the theory is all about. But it is enough to get the general idea. Enjoy!

Archetypal Criticism. In criticism “archetype” signifies narrative designs, character types, or images which are said to be identifiable in a wide variety of works of literature, as well as in myths, dreams, and even ritualized modes of social behavior. The archetypal similarities within these diverse phenomena are held to reflect a set of universal, primitive, and elemental patterns, whose effective embodiment in a literary work evokes a profound response from the reader. The death-rebirth theme is often said to be the archetype of archetypes. Other archetypal themes are the journey underground, the heavenly ascent, the search for the father, the paradise-Hades image, the Promethean rebel-hero, the scapegoat, the earth goddess, and the fatal woman.

Feminist Criticism. A Feminist Critic sees cultural and economic disabilities in a “patriarchal” society which have hindered or prevented women from realizing their creative possibilities and women’s cultural identification is as a merely negative object, or “Other” to man as the defining and dominating “Subject.” There are several assumptions and concepts held in common by most feminist critics.

1. Our civilization is pervasively patriarchal.
2. The concepts of “gender” are largely, if not entirely, cultural constructs, effected by the omnipresent patriarchal biases of our civilization.
3. This patriarchal ideology also pervades those writings which have been considered great literature. Such works lack autonomous female role models, are implicitly addressed to male readers, and leave the woman reader an alien outsider or else solicit her to identify against herself by assuming male values and ways of perceiving. Feeling and acting.

This is somewhat like Marxist criticism, but instead of focusing on the relationships between the classes it focuses on the relationships between the genders. Under this theory you would examine the patterns of thought, behavior, values, enfranchisement, and power in relations between the sexes. For example, “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been” can be seen as the story of the malicious dominance men have over women both physically and psychologically. Connie is the female victim of the role in society that she perceives herself playing—the coy young lass whose life depends upon her looks.

Marxist Criticism. A Marxist Critic grounds his theory and practice on the economic and cultural theory of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, especially on the following claims:

1. The evolving history of humanity, its institutions and its ways of thinking are determined by the changing mode of its “material production”—that is, of its basic economic organization.
2. Historical changes in the fundamental mode of production effect essential changes both in the constitution and power relations of social classes, which carry on a conflict for economic, political, and social advantage.
3. Human consciousness in any era is constituted by an ideology—that is a set of concepts, beliefs, values, and ways of thinking and feeling through which human beings perceive, and by which they explain what they take to be reality. A Marxist Critic typically undertakes to “explain” the literature in any era by revealing the economic, class, and ideological determinants of the way an author writes, and to examine the relation of the text to the social reality of that time and place.

This school of critical theory focuses on power and money in works of literature. Who has the power/money? Who does not? What happens as a result? For example, it could be said that “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” is about the upper class attempting to maintain their power and influence over the lower class by chasing Ichabod, a lower class citizen with aspirations toward the upper class, out of town. This would explain some of the numerous descriptions you get of land, wealth, and hearty living through Ichabod’s eyes.

New Criticism is directed against the prevailing concern of critics with the lives and psychology of authors, with social background, and with literary history. There are several points of view and procedures that are held in common by most New Critics.

1. A poem should be treated as primarily poetry and should be regarded as an independent and self-sufficient object.
2. The distinctive procedure of the New Critic is explication, or close reading: The detailed and subtle analysis of the complex interrelations and ambiguities of the components within a work.

3. The principles of New Criticism are basically verbal. That is, literature is conceived to be a special kind of language whose attributes are defined by systematic opposition to the language of science and of practical and logical discourse. The key concepts of this criticism deal with the meanings and interactions of words, figures of speech, and symbols.

4. The distinction between literary genres is not essential.

Psychological and Psychoanalytic Criticism. Psychological criticism deals with a work of literature primarily as an expression, in fictional form, of the personality, state of mind, feelings, and desires of its author. The assumption of psychoanalytic critics is that a work of literature is correlated with its author's mental traits:

1. Reference to the author's personality is used to explain and interpret a literary work.
2. Reference to literary works is made in order to establish, biographically, the personality of the author.
3. The mode of reading a literary work itself is a way of experiencing the distinctive subjectivity or consciousness of its author.

This theory requires that we investigate the psychology of a character or an author to figure out the meaning of a text (although to apply an author's psychology to a text can also be considered biographical criticism, depending upon your point of view). For example, alcohol allows the latent thoughts and desires of the narrator of "The Black Cat" to surface in such a way that he ends up shirking the self-control imposed by social mores and standards and becomes the man his psyche has repressed his whole life.

Reader Response Criticism. This type of criticism does not designate any one critical theory, but focuses on the activity of reading a work of literature. Reader-response critics turn from the traditional conception of a work as an achieved structure of meanings to the responses of readers as their eyes follow a text. By this shift of perspective a literary work is converted into an activity that goes on in a reader's mind, and what had been features of the work itself—including narrator, plot, characters, style, and structure—is less important than the connection between a reader's experience and the text. It is through this interaction that meaning is made.

This is the school of thought most students seem to adhere to. Proponents believe that literature has no objective meaning or existence. People bring their own thoughts, moods, and experiences to whatever text they are reading and get out of it whatever they happen to, based upon their own expectations and ideas. For example, when I read "Sonny's Blues" I am reminded of my younger sister who loves music. The story really gets to me because sometimes I worry about her and my relationship with her. I want to support her in a way that Sonny's brother does not support Sonny.

Other theories we'll be discussing in class include:

Deconstruction. Deconstruction is, by far, the most difficult critical theory for people to understand. It was developed by some very smart (or very unstable) people who declare that literature means nothing because language means nothing. In other words, we cannot say that we know what the “meaning” of a story is because there is no way of knowing. For example, in some stories (like “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been”) that do not have tidy endings, you cannot assume you know what happened.

Historical Criticism. Using this theory requires that you apply to a text specific historical information about the time during which an author wrote. History, in this case, refers to the social, political, economic, cultural, and/or intellectual climate of the time. For example, William Faulkner wrote many of his novels and stories during and after World War II, which helps to explain the feelings of darkness, defeat, and struggle that pervade much of his work.

Structuralism . This is different from structural criticism, which looks at the “universal” qualities of a piece of literature. Structuralism is a theory that concentrates completely upon the text, bringing nothing else to it. It depends, for a large part, upon linguistic theory, so it is difficult to do without some background. On the very most basic level, however, structuralism investigates the kinds of patterns that are built up and broken down within a text and uses them to get at an interpretation of that text. For example, in *Our Town* each act begins with the Stage Manager providing factual information, moves toward the introduction of a “standard” concern in life, makes that concern seem insignificant, and then uses a character to comment upon, or moralize upon, that concern. This pattern indicates that the play is not actually the slow movement through the lives of some standard characters but a satire of the basic and ridiculous things humans consistently concern themselves with.