

Reading Literature

Critical Approaches

Literature can be read from a number of viewpoints, or with certain agendas in mind. "Criticism" in this context does not mean to find fault with; it means to analyze from a certain standpoint. A skilled reader will use a number of critical approaches when reading literature. The major approaches are summarized below.

Formalist Criticism looks only at the work itself and not at the context of the work. Formalist critics believe that a work can be understood through reading the work itself and by examining the form of the work.

Biographical Criticism argues that the life of the author provides some insights into the meaning of a literary work.

Historical Criticism looks at the historical context in which the work was produced, including the social, cultural, and intellectual milieu of the time. Historical criticism may ask what effect the piece had on the audience for which it was originally intended.

Gender Criticism feels that sexual identity influences how a piece is produced and how the reader reads and reacts to the piece. The strongest (and original) movement in gender criticism is **feminist criticism**, which views western literature as having been produced primarily in a patriarchal society.

Psychological Criticism uses psychological theories to examine the creative process, the intent of the author, and/or the actions and motivations of the characters in the piece of literature.

Sociological Criticism looks at the relationship of the artist and the society in which the piece was produced, or at the social elements in the piece itself.

Mythological Criticism looks at underlying universal symbols.

Reader-Response Criticism focuses on the response of each individual reader to a piece of literature, arguing that each reading is specific to the person doing the reading.

Deconstructionist Criticism evolved from the theory that language cannot represent reality. Deconstructionists argue that a text can be broken down to the point where it no longer contains coherent meaning.

Note: These approaches were summarized from a previous handout put together for The Center for Reading and Writing at Adirondack Community College. The source for the previous handout was John B. Padgett, egibp@olemiss.edu, who prepared it for English 200 at the University of Mississippi. Padgett's source of record was X.J. Kennedy and Dana Giola, Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, and Drama, sixth edition (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), pp. 1790-1818.