

Critical Approaches: Keys to Interpretation

Use the following approaches to help interpret literature beyond the reader-response level:

Formalistic: The meaning and value of a literary work resides in the text itself, independent of the author's intent. Of particular interest to the formalist critic are the elements of form—style, structure, tone, imagery and all elements that work together to create the text. This approach stresses the close reading of the text and insists that all statements about the work be supported by references to the text.

Formalistic Approach: This approach focuses on form. The analysis stresses items like symbols, images, and structure and how one part of the work relates to other parts and to the whole.

- How is the work's structure unified?
- How do various elements of the work reinforce its meaning?
- What recurring patterns (repeated or related words, images, etc.) can you find? What is the effect of these patterns or motifs?
- How does repetition reinforce the theme(s)?
- How does the writer's diction reveal or reflect the work's meaning?
- What is the effect of the plot, and what parts specifically produce that effect?
- What figures of speech are used? (metaphors, similes, etc.)
- Note the writer's use of paradox, irony, symbol, plot, characterization, and style of narration.
- What effects are produced? Do any of these relate to one another or to the theme?
- Is there a relationship between the beginning and the end of the story?
- What tone and mood are created at various parts of the work?
- How does the author create tone and mood? What relationship is there between tone and mood and the effect of the story?
- How do the various elements interact to create a unified whole?

Biographical: This approach begins with the assumption that understanding an author's life can help readers more thoroughly comprehend the work. Biographical data should amplify the meaning of the text but not drown it out with irrelevant material.

Biographical Approach: Focuses on connection of work to author's personal experiences.

- What aspects of the author's personal life are relevant to this story?
- Which of the author's stated beliefs are reflected in the work?
- Does the writer challenge or support the values of her contemporaries?
- What seem to be the author's major concerns? Do plot details and themes reflect any of the writer's personal experiences?
- Do any of the events in the story correspond to events experienced by the author?
- Do any of the characters in the story correspond to real people?

Historical: This approach seeks to understand a literary work by investigating the social, cultural, and intellectual context that produced it.

Historical Approach: This approach focuses on the connection of the work to the historical period in which it was written; literary historians attempt to connect the historical background of the work to specific aspects of the work.

- How does it reflect the time in which it was written?
- How accurately does the story depict the time in which it is set?
- What literary or historical influences helped to shape the form and content of the work?
- How does the story reflect the attitudes and beliefs of the time in which it was written or set?
- Consider beliefs and attitudes related to race, religion, politics, gender, society, philosophy, etc.
- What other literary works may have influenced the writer?
- What historical events or movements might have influenced this writer?
- How would characters and events in this story have been viewed by the writer's contemporaries?
- Does the story reveal or contradict the prevailing values of the time in which it was written?
- Does it provide an opposing view of the period's prevailing values?
- How important is it the historical context (the work's and the reader's) to interpreting the work?

Psychological: This approach reflects the effect that modern psychology has had on literature. Sigmund Freud's theories are central: human behavior and motivation, wish-fulfillment, sexuality, the unconscious, repression, tri-partite psyche (id, ego, superego), symbols, unconscious fears, etc.

Psychological Approach: This approach focuses on the psychology of characters.

- What forces are motivating the characters?
- Which behaviors of the characters are conscious ones?
- Which are unconscious?
- What conscious or unconscious conflicts exist between the characters?
- Given their backgrounds, how plausible is the characters' behavior?
- Are the theories of Freud or other psychologists applicable to this work? To what degree?
- Do any of the characters correspond to the parts of the tripartite self? (id, ego, superego)
- Does the character struggle with his/her identity? Is there a conflict between the character's real self and actual self?
- What roles do psychological disorders and dreams play in this story?
- Are the characters recognizable psychological types?
- How might a psychological approach account for different responses in female and male readers?
- How does the work reflect the writer's personal psychology?
- What do the characters' emotions and behaviors reveal about their psychological states?
- How does the work reflect the unconscious dimensions of the writer's mind?
- How does the reader's own psychology affect his response to the work?

Sociological: This approach examines literature in the cultural, economic and political context in which it is written or received. Additionally, the approach explores the relationship between the artist and society. Society's social hierarchy is examined. Who has power? Who does not have the power? Who is rich and who is poor in the ongoing struggle between the classes in society? Marxist criticism can illuminate the political and economic dimensions of literature.

Sociological Approach: This approach focuses on man's relationship to others in society, politics, religion, and business.

- What is the relationship between the characters and their society?
- Does the story address societal issues, such as race, gender, and class?

- How do social forces shape the power relationships between groups or classes of people in the story? Who has the power, and who doesn't? Why?
- How does the story reflect the Great American Dream or that of the dream of success?
- How does the story reflect urban, rural, or suburban values?
- What does the work say about economic or social power? Who has it and who doesn't? Any Marxist leanings evident?
- Does the story address issues of economic exploitation? What role does money play?
- How do economic conditions determine the direction of the characters' lives?
- Does the work challenge or affirm the social order it depicts?
- Can the protagonist's struggle be seen as symbolic of a larger class struggle?
- How does the microcosm (small world) of the story reflect the macrocosm (large world) of the society in which it was composed?
- Do any of the characters correspond to types of government, such as a dictatorship, democracy, communism, socialism, fascism, etc.? What attitudes toward these political structures/systems are expressed in the work?

Gender: This approach examines the role and image of men and women in literature. In particular, it addresses the stereotypes of men and women. Additionally, this approach helps us examine how the images of men and women reflect the social forces that have kept the sexes from achieving total equality. This approach has also been called the Feminist Approach, but in some instances, this title is too limited because it does not address the relationship of women to men and the various issues that shape the roles of males in societies.

Feminist Approach: This approach examines images of women and concepts of the feminine in myth and literature. It uses the psychological, archetypal, and sociological approaches and often focuses on female characters who have been neglected in previous criticism. Feminist critics attempt to correct or supplement what they regard as a predominantly male-dominated critical perspective.

- How are women's lives portrayed in the work?
- Is the form and content of the work influenced by the writer's gender?
- How do male and female characters relate to one another? Are these relationships sources of conflict? Are these conflicts resolved?
- Does the work challenge or affirm traditional views of women?
- How do the images of women in the story reflect patriarchal (from the father/male) social forces that have impeded women's efforts to achieve full equality with men?
- What marital expectations are imposed on the characters? What effect do these expectations have?
- What behavioral expectations are imposed on the characters? What effect do these expectations have?
- If a female character were male, how would the story be different (and vice versa)?
- How does the marital status of a character affect her decisions or happiness?

Archetypal/Mythological: This approach emphasizes the recurrent universal patterns underlying most literary works, combining the insights from anthropology, psychology, history, religion, myths, and symbols. Archetypes are critical as a symbol, character, situation, or image evokes a deep universal response. Examples include flood stories, creation stories, Cinderella stories, and stock characters: bumbling fool, idiot, innocent, vixen, sage, witch, etc.

Archetypal Approach: This approach focuses on connections to other literature, mythological/biblical allusions, archetypal images, symbols, characters, and themes.

- How does this story resemble other stories in plot, character, setting, or symbolism?
- What universal experiences are depicted?
- Are patterns suggested? Are seasons used to suggest a pattern or cycle?
- Does the protagonist undergo any kind of transformation, such as movement from innocence to experience, that seems archetypal?
- Are the names significant?
- Is there a Christ-like figure in the work?
- Does the writer allude to biblical or mythological literature? For what purpose?
- What aspects of the work create deep universal responses to it?
- How does the work reflect the hopes, fears, and expectations of entire cultures (for example, the ancient Greeks)?
- How do myths attempt to explain the unexplainable: origin of man? Purpose and destiny of human beings?
- What common human concerns are revealed in the story?
- How do stories from one culture correspond to those of another? (For example, creation myths, flood myths, etc.)
- How does the story reflect the experiences of death and rebirth?
- What archetypal events occur in the story? (Quest? Initiation? Scape-goats? Descending into the underworld? Ascending into heaven?)
- What archetypal images occur? (Water, rising sun, setting sun, symbolic colors)
- What archetypal characters appear in the story? (Mother Earth? Femme Fatal? Wise old man? Wanderer?)
- What archetypal settings appear? (Garden? Desert?)
- How and why are these archetypes embodied in the work?

Philosophical: This approach asks the reader to examine the human experience in text? What is the role of man/woman in the universe? What is the relationship of humans to god/s? Is there good? Does it prevail? Is there evil? Is it punished? Is the world random or ordered? Fate vs. Free will?

Philosophical Approach: This approach focuses on themes, view of the world, moral statements, author's philosophy, etc.

- What view of life does the story present? Which character best articulates this viewpoint?
- According to this work's view of life, what is mankind's relationship to God? To the universe?
- What moral statement, if any, does this story make? Is it explicit or implicit?
- What is the author's attitude toward his world? Toward fate? Toward God?
- What is the author's conception of good and evil?
- What does the work say about the nature of good or evil?
- What does the work say about human nature?