

Literary Criticism: Questions for a Variety of Approaches

I. Formalistic Approach This approach focuses on form, stressing symbols, images, and structure and how one part of the work relates to other parts and to the whole.

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

II. Biographical Approach This approach focuses on connection of work to author's personal experiences.

1. What aspects of the author's personal life are relevant to this story?
2. Which of the author's stated beliefs are reflected in the work?
3. Does the writer challenge or reflect the values of her contemporaries?
4. What seem to be the author's major concerns? Do they reflect any of the writer's personal experiences?
5. Do any of the events in the story correspond to events experienced by the author?
6. Do any of the characters in the story correspond to real people?

III. Historical Approach This approach focuses on 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.

1. How does it reflect the time in which it was written?
2. How accurately does the story depict the time in which it is set?
3. What literary or historical influences helped to shape the form and content of the work?
4. How does the story reflect the attitudes and beliefs of the time in which it was written or set? (Think beliefs and attitudes related to race, religion, politics, gender, society, philosophy, etc.)
5. What other literary works may have influenced the writer?
6. What historical events or movements might have influenced this writer?
7. How would characters and events in this story have been viewed by the writer's contemporaries?
8. 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?
9. How important is it the historical context (the work's and the reader's) to interpreting the work?

IV. Psychological Approach: This approach focuses on the psychological motivation of characters.

1. What forces are motivating the characters?
2. Which behaviors of the characters are conscious ones?
3. Which unconscious?
4. What conscious or unconscious conflicts between the characters exist?
5. Given their backgrounds, how plausible is the characters' behavior?
6. Are the theories of Freud or other psychologists applicable to this work? To what degree?

7. Do any of the characters correspond to the parts of the tripartite self? (id, ego, superego)
8. What roles do psychological disorders and dreams play in this story?
9. Are the characters recognizable psychological types?
10. How might a psychological approach account for different responses in female and male readers?
11. How does the work reflect the writer's personal psychology?
12. What do the characters' emotions and behaviors reveal about their psychological states?
13. How does the work reflect the unconscious dimensions of the writer's mind?
14. How does the reader's own psychology affect his response to the work?

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

1. What is the relationship between the characters and their society?
2. Does the story address societal issues, such as race, gender, and class?
3. 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?
4. How does the story reflect the Great American Dream?
5. How does the story reflect urban, rural, or suburban values?
6. What does the work say about economic or social power? Who has it and who doesn't? Any Marxist leanings evident?
7. Does the story address issues of economic exploitation? What role does money play?
8. How do economic conditions determine the direction of the characters' lives?
9. Does the work challenge or affirm the social order it depicts?
10. Can the protagonist's struggle be seen as symbolic of a larger class struggle?
11. How does the microcosm (small world) of the story reflect the macrocosm (large world) of the society in which it was composed?
12. 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?

VI. Gender Criticism This approach is a subset of the sociological approach and examines images of men and women, concepts of the feminine in myth and literature, the presence or absence of men or women in the story.

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

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

1. What view of life does the story present? Which character best articulates this viewpoint?
2. According to this work's view of life, what is mankind's relationship to God? To the universe?
3. What moral statement, if any, does this story make? Is it explicit or implicit?
4. What is the author's attitude toward his world? Toward fate? Toward God?

5. What is the author's conception of good and evil?
6. What does the work say about the nature of good or evil?
7. Is good rewarded? Is evil punished?
8. Is the world ordered or random?
9. What does the work say about human nature?

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

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

IX. Reader Response Criticism This approach focuses on what is going on in the reader's mind during the process of reading a text. The critic attempts to read the reader by exploring how reader's expectations and assumptions are met or not met. Reader-response critics believe that readers create rather than discover meaning and that a literary work evolves as a reader processes characters, plots, images, and other elements while reading.

1. How does the meaning of a text change as you reread it?
2. How do your values alter your perceptions of the text?
3. How have readers in different time periods or of different ages interpreted the text?
4. How is the informed reader's response to the text shaped by the reader and the text?
5. Which of your personal experiences or memories is affecting your perceptions of the story?
6. What was the work's original intended audience? To what extent are you similar or different from that audience?