

LITERARY CRITICISM – AN OVERVIEW (Grade 11 IB)

Literary Criticism means assessing the quality of a piece of writing by examining how the writer has written the piece and what affect it creates. It is intended as a means of interpreting text and a method of communicating that interpretation through a set of criteria common to those within a particular school of thought. There are many critical frameworks (lenses) that allow us to interpret literature, film, art, drama, music, or life experiences in general.

There are four elements to consider when examining a literary text:

1. The text itself (including content, style, genre)
2. The author (his or her background, intentions)
3. The universe (everything that is written or believed about the subject)
4. The audience or the reader (his or her response based on social and personal background and context)

Major Schools of Literary Theory

Literary Lens	Major Focus	Specific Focus
Feminist	Social Norms	How women are portrayed
Marxist	Social Norms	How society is organized
Psychoanalytical – Freudian	Individual Characters The Author	Why a character behaves the way he/she does What we learn about the author
Archetypal – Jungian	Individual Characters	Why a character behaves the way he/she does
Archetypal	The Text	What universal patterns exist within the text
Postmodern	The Text	How the meaning of a text is, at best, ambiguous
Reader Response	The Reader	How the reader creates the meaning of the text
New Criticism	The Text	How the text is written and why is it written this way

FEMINIST LENS

This lens helps us examine how gender is a factor in a literary text. The main focus is on how women are portrayed, how they function, behave, are limited/privileged for being women. However, we also examine how maleness defines roles and limits men.

- ◆ The meaning of a text can be uncovered through the representation of gender
- ◆ Explores the power-relationships represented by gender in texts
- ◆ Rediscovered works of overlooked women writers
- ◆ Reviews books by male writers to understand how they reflect and shape the attitudes that have held women back
- ◆ Critics focus on the representation of female characters and the implied messages about women

KEY TERMS

<i>Patriarchal Oppression</i>	<i>Matriarchal Gender Expectations</i>	<i>Gynocentric</i>	<i>Phallogentric Exploitation</i>	<i>“Other”</i>	<i>Gender Roles</i>
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KEY QUESTIONS

- ◆ How are women in the story represented? What stereotypes, or oppositions, are in place?
- ◆ What is the male protagonist’s attitude toward the female characters in the text? How is this evident?
- ◆ How do the women in the story exercise power? With what consequences?
- ◆ What are the social and historic conditions for women in this period that might help us understand their roles and desires?

MAJOR CONTRIBUTORS TO THEORY

- ◆
- ◆ Virginia Woolf
- ◆ Germaine Greer
- ◆ Simone de Beauvoir
- ◆ Elaine Showalter
- ◆ Jennifer Baumgardner
- ◆ Ami Richard

MARXIST LENS

Named after Karl Marx but not promoting communism, this lens helps us examine how socioeconomic factors influence the characters, plot, setting, reader/viewer, author/maker, time period, or any other aspect of a text. Karl Marx said that human history can be studied best by looking at how the proletariat (lower, working classes; blue collar jobs) interacts with the bourgeoisie (the middle/upper classes; white collar jobs).

- ◆ How power relationships are defined and negotiated within the text
- ◆ How texts sustain, reproduce and represent existing power relationships (sexual, social, political, economic, etc.)
- ◆ Representation of class distinctions and class conflict in literature (proletariat (poor) vs. bourgeoisie (rich))
- ◆ Social and political elements rather than artistic and visual (aesthetic) elements examined

KEY TERMS

<i>Proletariat</i>	<i>Bourgeoisie</i>	<i>Capitalism</i>	<i>Classism</i>	<i>Materialism</i>	<i>Racism</i>
<i>Commodification</i>	<i>Class</i>		<i>Class Mobility</i>	<i>Oppression</i>	

KEY QUESTIONS

- ◆ Who has power (and of what sorts) in the text? How does this operate and change as the text progress?
- ◆ To what degree do the characters believe in and live by the prevailing social order? Why? How is this evident?
- ◆ What 'master' or dominant social ideals are perpetuated or critiqued and change as the text progresses?
- ◆ What is the economic status of a particular literary character and what is his or her social class?
- ◆ How do the characters' economic status and/or social class affect what happens to him or her?
- ◆ What sorts of obstacles does a character face as a result of their position and how are they defeated by, or manage to overcome, these obstacles?
- ◆ With whom do you identify and sympathize?

MAJOR CONTRIBUTORS TO THEORY

- ◆ Karl Marx
- ◆ Friedrich Engels
- ◆ Louis Althusser

PSYCHOANALYTIC LENS – FREUDIAN

Psychoanalytical Criticism is based on the idea that literary texts, like dreams, uncover the secret or unconscious desires and anxieties of the author. The theory requires that we investigate the psychology of a character using Freudian psychological principles to understand the meaning of the text. Critics attempt to psychoanalyze the author's unconscious desires, the reader's responses, and the characters in the work. This approach involves examining the text for symbols and psychological complexes.

- ◆ A great way to practice psychoanalytical criticism is to analyze the behavior of the characters in the text.
- ◆ Often the characters' behavior represents the psychological experience of the author or of human beings in general.

KEY TERMS

<i>Id</i>	<i>Ego</i>	<i>Superego</i>	<i>Conscious</i>	<i>Unconscious</i>	<i>Oedipal Complex</i>			
<i>Elektra Complex</i>		<i>Repression</i>	<i>Primal Fears</i>	<i>Displacement</i>	<i>Compensation</i>	<i>Phallus</i>		
<i>Dream Interpretation</i>	<i>Narcissism</i>	<i>Denial</i>	<i>Sublimation</i>	<i>Freudian Slip</i>	<i>Envy</i>	<i>Guilt</i>		

KEY QUESTIONS

- ◆ Is there a dream like quality to the story?
- ◆ What are the behaviors and attitudes of the characters at the beginning, and how do these change through the course of the story?
- ◆ What types of symbols are used in the stories which hint at repressed feelings, actions or emotions in the characters?
- ◆ How is the unconscious represented? Is it clearly detectable or is it carefully protected? Which characters provide glimpses at this unconscious?
- ◆ Do you see any 'irregular' behavior in the characters in the text? What might be the reasons behind it?
- ◆ How can characters' behavior, narrative events and/or images be explained in terms of psychoanalytic concepts of any kind (id, ego, superego, displacement, etc.)?
- ◆ What does the work suggest about the psychological being of its author?

MAJOR CONTRIBUTORS TO THEORY

- ◆ Sigmund Freud
- ◆ Jacques Lacan
- ◆ Charles Mauron

ARCHETYPAL LENS – JUNGIAN

Jungian Archetypal Criticism is based on the psychoanalytical ideas of Carl Jung. The theory requires that we investigate the psychology of a character as an author using Jungian psychological principles to understand the meaning of the text. Critics attempt to psychoanalyze the author's unconscious desires, the reader's responses, and the characters in the work. This approach involves examining the text for symbols and psychological complexes.

- ◆ A great way to practice psychoanalytical criticism is to analyze the behavior of the characters in the text.
- ◆ Often the characters' behavior represents the psychological experience of the author or of human beings in general.

KEY TERMS

<i>Collective Unconscious</i>	<i>Persona</i>	<i>Anima</i>	<i>Animus</i>	<i>Self</i>	<i>Shadow</i>
<i>Symbol</i>	<i>Primordial Images</i>	<i>Individuation</i>	<i>Archetypes</i>		

KEY QUESTIONS

- ◆ Do you see any 'irregular' behavior in the characters in the text? What might be the reasons behind it?
- ◆ How can characters' behavior, narrative events and/or images be explained in terms of Jungian psychoanalytic concepts of any kind (persona, anima/animus, shadow, self, etc.)?
- ◆ What are the behaviors and attitudes of the characters at the beginning, and how do these change through the course of the story?

MAJOR CONTRIBUTORS TO THEORY

- ◆ Carl Jung
- ◆ Claude Levi-Strauss

ARCHETYPAL LENS

An archetype is “a typical or recurring image, character, narrative design, theme, or other literary phenomenon that has been in literature from the beginning and regularly reappears.” (M.H. Abrahms)

Archetypal literary criticism is a type of critical theory that interprets a text by focusing on recurring myths and archetypes in the narrative, symbols, images, and character types in a literary work.

Archetypal literary criticism’s origins are rooted in two other academic disciplines, social anthropology and psychoanalysis.

Archetypal critics believe that literature, through language, can convey the mythical outlines of universal truths. This is because each person’s “unconscious” can be divided into two parts: personal and collective. Our “collective unconscious” is composed of our shared memories of human experience and ancestry. Archetypes are recurring images that come out of the collective unconscious which pass through all human history and culture. Images, descriptive details, plot patterns and character types are believed to generate profound emotions since they pull from our collective unconscious and show that these literary patterns are a reflection of a total human experience.

KEY TERMS

<i>Collective Unconscious</i>	<i>Symbol</i>	<i>Primordial Images</i>	<i>Archetypes</i>	<i>Monomyth</i>
<i>Hero’s Journey</i>	<i>Character Archetypes</i>			

KEY QUESTIONS

- ◆ What archetypal themes are conveyed in the text?
- ◆ What archetypal characters are used in the text?
- ◆ What archetypal symbols are used in the text? How are they used?
- ◆ Does the plot follow an archetypal pattern? (Monomyth?)
- ◆ Does the “hero” embark on a journey in either a physical or spiritual sense?
- ◆ What trials or ordeals does the protagonist face? What is the reward for overcoming them?
- ◆ What universal experiences are depicted?
- ◆ What common human concerns are revealed in the story?

MAJOR CONTRIBUTORS TO THEORY

- ◆ Carl Jung
- ◆ Joseph Campbell
- ◆ Northrop Frye

POST-MODERNIST LENS (DECONSTRUCTIONISM)

Post-modernism is a critical approach to language, literature, and culture that questions or criticizes “meaning”. Like structuralism, post-modernists rely on close readings of texts; however, they believe that language is inherently unstable in meaning and the meaning of the text is ultimately indecipherable. Where structuralists believe that a “true” meaning can be found, post-modernists believe that this is inherently impossible. At most, a text can have multiple meanings (ambiguity), if it has any meaning at all. One of the benefits of this school is that it allows for multiple interpretations. Another benefit is that it demands a close, careful reading.

Much of the deconstructionist argument rests on the fact that language is too imprecise to convey ideas – especially abstract ones. Words often have multiple meanings. Post-modernists assert that if we cannot trust language systems to convey truth, the very bases of truth are unreliable and the universe - or at least the universe we have constructed - becomes unraveled or de-centered. Post-modernism sees “disorder” and “chaos” and “chance” as natural conditions of society; therefore, any “text” that tries to impose or state a “grand” meaning on life or society must be flawed.

KEY TERMS

<i>Ambiguity</i>	<i>Relativity of Ideas</i>	<i>History is Fiction</i>	<i>Image is Everything</i>	<i>Pastiche</i>
<i>Irony</i>	<i>Dark Humour</i>	<i>Satire</i>	<i>Metafiction</i>	
<i>Non-Linear Narratives and Fragmentation</i>		<i>Technoculture and Paranoia</i>		
<i>Post-structuralism</i>	<i>Deconstruction</i>	<i>Temporality</i>	<i>Historic Specificity</i>	
<i>Metaphoric Elasticity of Ideas</i>				

KEY QUESTIONS

- ◆ Can a text (or part of the text) be interpreted in a number of different ways (ambiguity)?
- ◆ Can it be shown that some part of a work of literature can be interpreted in so many contradictory ways that the whole idea of saying it means something becomes a problem?
- ◆ What assumptions does a work of literature and/or its author make? (i.e. Does a novel about WWI assume that you know the history of the period?)
- ◆ Do you see contradictory ‘truths’ in the text?
- ◆ Who speaks in the text, and who is silent? Why?
- ◆ How does the first person account or the omniscient authorial voice manipulate meaning and the reader? (First person narrators should always be questioned!)
- ◆ With which character do you identify in this story? Why? What are the potential effects of your interpretation on the meaning?
- ◆ What social factors in your own life might cause you to interpret the text the way you do? How might they cause you to respond to it?

- ◆ What rules of form or structure does the text/work break? What effect does this have on the reader/audience?
- ◆ What aspects of society are being critiqued using the dystopian context of the text/work?
- ◆ How is language questioned in the work?
- ◆ How does the work undermine or contradict generally accepted truths?
- ◆ How does the author (or a character) omit, change, or reconstruct memory and identity?
- ◆ How does a work fulfill or move outside the established conventions of its genre?
- ◆ How does the work deal with the separation (or lack thereof) between writer, work, and reader?
- ◆ What ideology does the text seem to promote?
- ◆ What is left out of the text that if included might undermine the goal of the work?
- ◆ If we changed the point of view of the text - say from one character to another, or multiple characters - how would the story change? Whose story is not told in the text? Who is left out and why might the author have omitted this character's tale?

MAJOR CONTRIBUTORS TO THEORY

- ◆ Jacques Derrida

READER RESPONSE LENS

Reader-Response theorists share two beliefs:

1. that the role of the reader cannot be omitted from our understanding of literature and
2. that readers do not passively consume the meaning presented to them by an objective literary text; rather they actively make the meaning they find in literature

In Reader-Response criticism, a work of literature is not considered to have an inherent meaning in itself. Instead, the meaning is seen as a product of each individual's reading and interpretation of the work, so that no one meaning negates or invalidates another. Reader-Response criticism is a critical approach that shifts the emphasis to the reader from the text or the work's author and context. This approach focuses on the individual reader's evolving response to the text. The readers, through their own values and experiences, "create" the meaning of the text and therefore there is no one correct meaning.

KEY TERMS

Active Reader

Objectivity

Subjectivity

Authorial Intent

Intentional Fallacy

Intended Reader

KEY QUESTIONS

- ◆ How does the text connect with you personally?
- ◆ What is your overall reaction to the text?
- ◆ How much does the text agree or disagree with your view of the world and what you think is right and wrong?
- ◆ How well does the text address things that you personally care about and consider important in the world?
- ◆ What other texts does this text remind you of?
- ◆ Does a text have as many meanings as we have responses to it?
- ◆ How do the reader's assumptions affect the reader's understanding of the text?
- ◆ Are some responses more valid than or superior to other responses?
- ◆ How does the interaction of text and reader create meaning?

MAJOR CONTRIBUTORS TO THEORY



◆ Adena Rosmarin

◆ Louise M. Rosenblatt

◆ Wolfgang Iser

NEW CRITICAL LENS (FORMALISM, STRUCTURALISM, CLOSE READING)

New Criticism is a movement in literary criticism that proposes close reading and textual analysis of the text itself with alertness to its elements of verbal nuance and thematic organization. It is referred to as "New" because it operates contrary to the previously favoured focus on the author's biography, the historical context, and the perceived parallels between these and the text. Practitioners focus on both the "external form" (e.g. ballad, ode) and the "internal forms" (e.g. structure, repetition, patterns of figurative language, plot/content, syntax/diction, tone, mood, context/setting, style, literary devices, theme). These practitioners reject consideration of the author's intention and the effect on the reader as illegitimate. They believe the text should be looked at objectively as an autonomous whole separate from the writer's life and the socio-cultural background and influences. The movement is also referred to as **formalism** or **structuralism**. Like archetypal critics, structuralists look for common structures in literary works and try to understand the relationship between them. Many works that seem to have little or no connection to one another are often found to contain deep structural similarities.

KEY TERMS

<i>Close Reading</i>	<i>Affective Fallacy</i>	<i>Intentional Fallacy</i>	<i>Form</i>	<i>Literary Devices</i>
<i>Figurative Language</i>	<i>Objectivity</i>	<i>Theme</i>		

KEY QUESTIONS

- ◆ Why is the text written the way that it is?
- ◆ How is the text written – what stylistic techniques or literary devices are used?
- ◆ What effect does these techniques and devices create?
- ◆ What is the pace of the text? How is it created? How does it contribute to the overall meaning of the text?
- ◆ What is the tone of the poem/passage? How is the tone created? How does the tone contribute to the overall meaning of the text?
- ◆ What is the meaning of the poem/passage? What is the poem's/passage's overall effect?

MAJOR CONTRIBUTORS TO THEORY

- ◆ John Crowe Ransom (Vanderbilt)
- ◆ Allen Tate
- ◆ Cleanth Brooks
- ◆ Robert Penn Warren

William K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley