**Critical Approaches**

**Checklist of Biographical Critical Questions**

* What influences—people, ideas, movements, events—evident in the writer’s life does the work reflect?
* To what extent are the events described in the word a direct transfer of what happened in the writer’s actual life?
* What modifications of the actual events has the writer made in the literary work? For what possibly purposes?
* What are the effects of the differences between actual events and their literary transformation in the poem, story, play, or essay?
* What has the author revealed in the work about his/her characteristic modes of thought, perception, or emotion? What place does this work have in the artist’s literary development and career?

**A Checklist of Historical Critical Questions**

* When was the work written? When was it published? How was it received by the critics and public and why?
* What does the work’s reception reveal about the standards of taste and value during the time it was published and reviewed?
* What social attitudes and cultural practices related to the action of the word were prevalent during the time the work was written and published?
* What kinds of power relationships does the word describe, reflect, or embody?
* How do the relationships reflected in the literary work manifest themselves in the cultural practices and social institutions prevalent during the time the work was written and published?
* To what extent can we understand the past as it is reflected in the literary work?
* To what extent does the work reflect differences from the ideas and values of its time?

**A Checklist of Formalistic Critical Questions**

* How is the work structured or organized? How does it begin? Where does it go next? How does it end? What is the work’s plot? How is its plot related to its structure?
* What is the relationship of each part of the work to the work as a whole? How are the parts related to one another?
* Who is narrating or telling what happens in the work? How is the narrator, speaker, or character revealed to readers? How do we come to know and

understand this figure?

* Who are the major and minor characters, what do they represent, and how do they relate to one another?
* What are the time and place of the work—it’s setting? How is the setting related to what we know of the characters and their actions? To what extent is the setting symbolic?
* What kind of language does the author use to describe, narrate, explain, or otherwise create the world of the literary work? More specifically, what images, similes, metaphors, symbols appear in the work? What is their function? What meanings do they convey?

**Checklist of Psychological Critical Questions**

* What connections can you make between your knowledge of an author’s life and the behavior and motivations of characters in his or her work?
* How does your understanding of the characters, their relationships, their actions, and their motivations in a literary work help you better understand the mental world and imaginative life, or the actions and motivations of the author?
* How does a particular literary work—its images, metaphors, and other linguistic elements—reveal the psychological motivations of its characters or the psychological mindset of its author?
* To what extent can you employ the concepts of Freudian psychoanalysis to understand the motivations of literary characters?
* What kinds of literary works and what types of literary characters seem best suited to a critical approach that employs a psychological or psychoanalytical perspective? Why?
* How can a psychological or psychoanalytical approach to a particular work be combined with an approach from another critical perspective—for example, biographical, formalist, or feminist criticism?

**Checklist of Symbolic or Mythological Critical Questions**

* What incidents in the work seem common or familiar enough as actions that they might be considered symbolic or archetypal? Are there any journeys, battles, falls, reversals of fortune, etc.?
* What kinds of character types appear in the work? How might they be classified?
* What creatures, elements of nature, or man-made objects playing a role in the work might be considered symbolic?
* What changes do the characters undergo? How can those changes be characterized or named? To what might they be related or compared?
* What religious or quasi-religious traditions might the work’s story, characters, elements, or objects be compared to or affiliated with? Why?

**Checklist of Sociological or Cultural Questions**

* How do the relationships between characters develop? What kind of relationships does the main character have with others?
* What type of society is portrayed in the work? What class structure is present and how does it affect the characters and/or plot?
* What traditions are presented in the work? How do these traditions factor into the character development or conflict?
* Does religion factor into the work? How strongly does this society believe in science? Do science and religion conflict or align in this society?
* What does this society value? What is portrayed as good or bad? What are the consequences of crime in this society?
* What type of family structure exists? How strong are familial bonds?
* Is social change such as modernization a factor in this work? How?
* What is the role of the individual in this society?
* Are religious and scientific views of the world necessarily in conflict with each other? How are they either contradictory or complementary?

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| **CRITICAL APPROACHES TO LITERATURE**Described below are nine common critical approaches to the literature.You will have essay assignments that use several of these. See your Short Guide textbook for additional information.    **Formalist Criticism:** This form of criticism emphasizes the form of the work, with "form" meaning the genre or type of work. This approach regards literature as "a unique form of human knowledge that needs to be examined on its own terms."1 All the elements necessary for understanding the work are contained within the work itself. From the stance of the formalist critic you will look at such elements of a work as form-style, structure, tone, imagery, etc.-that are found within the text. Your primary goal as a formalist critic is to determine how such elements work together with the text's content to shape its effects upon readers.  |
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 | **Biographical Criticism:** This approach "begins with the simple but central insight that literature is written by actual people and that understanding an author's life can help readers more thoroughly comprehend the work."  Biographical critics contend that by understanding the life and experiences of a writer readers can better understand a text. However, a biographical critic must be careful not to take the biographical facts of a writer's life too far in criticizing the works of that writer.  As a biographical critic your task is to explicate the text by using insights gained from knowing details about the author's life.  The focus is still on the text, but in light of biography--not the other way around. |

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 | **Psychological Criticism:** This approach reflects the effect that modern psychology has had upon both literature and literary criticism. It is akin to biographical criticism as it looks at the author--this time from a psychoanalytic stance. Fundamental figures in psychological criticism include Sigmund Freud, whose "psychoanalytic theories changed our notions of human behavior by exploring new or controversial areas like wish-fulfillment, sexuality, the unconscious, and repression" as well as expanding our understanding of how "language and symbols operate by demonstrating their ability to reflect unconscious fears or desires"; and Carl Jung, whose theories about the  unconscious are also a key foundation of mythological criticism (see below). Psychological criticism has a number of approaches, but in general, it usually employs one (or more) of three approaches:      1. An investigation of "the creative process of the artist: what is the nature of literary genius and how does it relate to normal mental functions?"       2. The psychological study of a particular artist, usually noting how an author's biographical circumstances affect or influence their motivations and/or behavior.       3. The analysis of fictional characters using the language and methods of psychology.   |
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 | **Historical Criticism:** This approach "seeks to understand a literary work by investigating the social, cultural, and intellectual context that produced it-a context that necessarily includes the artist's biography and milieu." A key goal for historical critics is to understand the effect of a literary work upon its original readers.  Another focus may be how the times in which a writer lived influenced him or her. Was he or she in step or working against the popular culture of the day? is one question you might ask. Again your focus from a historical perspective is on the work: how is the work better understood through the lens of historical context. |

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 | **Sociological Criticism:** One type of historical critisim is this approach which "examines literature in the cultural, economic and political context in which it is written or received," exploring the relationships between the artist and society. Sometimes it examines the artist's society to better understand the author's literary works; other times, it may examine the representation of such societal elements within the literature itself. One influential type of sociological criticism is Marxist criticism, which focuses on the economic and political elements of art, often emphasizing the ideological content of literature. Because Marxist criticism often argues that all art is political, either challenging or endorsing (by silence) the status quo, it is frequently evaluative and judgmental, a tendency that "can lead to reductive judgment, as when Soviet critics rated Jack London better than William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, Edith Wharton, and Henry James, because he illustrated the principles of class struggle more clearly."  Nonetheless, Marxist criticism "can illuminate political and economic dimensions of literature other approaches overlook." Indeed, Marxist criticism sees history centered on a struggle between socioecenomic classes; therefore it sees literature as a result or at least coming about from the context of the struggle.      |
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 | **Gender Criticism:** This approach "examines how sexual identity influences the creation and reception of literary works." Originally an offshoot of feminist movements, gender criticism today includes a number of approaches, including the so-called "masculinist" approach recently advocated by poet Robert Bly. It also takes in lesbian and gay criticism. The bulk of gender criticism, however, is feminist and takes as a central precept that the patriarchal attitudes that have dominated western thought have resulted, consciously or unconsciously, in literature "full of examined 'male-produced' assumptions." Feminist criticism attempts to correct this imbalance by analyzing and combatting such attitudes-by questioning, for example, why none of the characters in Shakespeare's play Othello ever challenge the right of a husband to murder a wife accused of adultery. Other goals of feminist critics include "analyzing how sexual identity influences the reader of a text" and "examin[ing] how the images of men and women in imaginative literature reflect or reject the social forces that have historically kept the sexes from achieving total equality." From a feminist vantage point you might assume that because the experiences of the sexes differ, their values and ideas differ, and therefore the way men write and read texts and the way women write and read texts also differs.  |

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 | **Mythological Criticism or Archetypal Criticism:** This approach emphasizes "the recurrent universal patterns underlying most literary works." Combining the insights from anthropology, psychology, history, and comparative religion, mythological criticism "explores the artist's common humanity by tracing how the individual imagination uses myths and symbols common to different cultures and epochs." One key concept in mythlogical criticism is the archetype, "a symbol, character, situation, or image that evokes a deep universal response," which entered literary criticism from Swiss psychologist Carl Jung. According to Jung, all individuals share a "`collective unconscious,' a set of primal memories common to the human race, existing below each person's conscious mind"-often deriving from primordial phenomena such as the sun, moon, fire, night, and blood, archetypes according to Jung "trigger the collective unconscious." Another critic, Northrop Frye, defined archetype in a more limited way as "a symbol, usually an image, which recurs often enough in literature to be recognizable as an element of one's literary experience as a whole."  Regardless of the definition of archetype they use, mythological critics tend to view literary works in the broader context of works sharing a similar pattern.   |
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 | **Reader-Response Criticism:** This approach takes as a fundamental tenet that "literature" exists not as an artifact upon a printed page but as a transaction between the physical text and the mind of a reader. It attempts "to describe what happens in the reader's mind while interpreting a text" and reflects that reading, like writing, is a creative process.  According to reader-response critics, literary texts do not "contain" a meaning; meanings derive only from the act of individual readings. Hence, two different readers may derive completely different interpretations of the same literary text; likewise, a reader who re-reads a work years later may find the work shockingly different. It helps to borrow from biographical and historical criticism and understand the context from which the text came and compare to your situation. The characters and worlds we find in literature are more often than not very different from ourselves in significant ways; how we as readers make connections, appreciate or challenge a work has much to do with our response, that is to say, our bringing our own experiences to the text to bridge the gap.  What assumptions and values do you as a reader have?  What assumptions and values might the author have had? Reader-response criticism, then, emphasizes how "religious, cultural, and social values affect readings; it also overlaps with gender criticism in exploring how men and women read the same text with different assumptions." Though this approach rejects the notion that a single "correct" reading exists for a literary work, it does not consider all readings permissible: "Each text creates limits to its possible interpretations."  |

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 | **Deconstructionist Criticism:** This approach "rejects the traditional assumption that language can accurately represent reality." Deconstructionist critics regard language as a fundamentally unstable medium-the words "tree" or "dog," for instance, undoubtedly conjure up different mental images for different people-and therefore, because literature is made up of words, literature possesses no fixed, single meaning. It is oppositional to Formalist criticism. According to critic Paul de Man, deconstructionists insist on "the impossibility of making the actual expression coincide with what has to be expressed, of making the actual signs [i.e., words] coincide with what is signified." As a result, deconstructionist critics tend to emphasize not what is being said but how language is used in a text. The methods of this approach tend to resemble those of formalist criticism, but whereas formalists' primary goal is to locate unity within a text, "how the diverse elements of a text cohere into meaning," deconstructionists try to show how the text "deconstructs," "how it can be broken down ... into mutually irreconcilable positions." Other goals of deconstructionists include (1) challenging the notion of authors' "ownership" of texts they create (and their ability to control the meaning of their texts) and (2) focusing on how language is used to achieve power, as when they try to understand how a some interpretations of a literary work come to be regarded as "truth." So this approach has some in common with Sociological criticism in that it holds that a text is constructed within a social context.      1. Quotations are from X.J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia's *Literature: An Introductionto Fiction, Poetry, and Drama*, Sixth Edition (New York: HarperCollins, 1995). 1790-1818.    Additional Sources:  Barnet, Sylvan and William Cain. *A Short Guide to Writing About Literature*, 9th ed. New York: Longman, 2003.  Harmon, William and C. Hugh Holman. *A Handbook to Literature*, 7th ed. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1996.  John B. Padgett. *Critical Approaches to Literature*.Handout. U of Mississippi. 2003.  |