

Some Approaches to Literary Theory

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Forward

The introduction of Literary Theory studies into literature programs during the last twenty-five years or so has been both a great blessing and curse. At best, literary theory studies empower readers with freedoms of interpretations, based upon personal inclinations, predispositions, and intellectual choices. At worst, studies into literary theories become ends unto themselves or create attitudes that only one literary theory is valid which is pursued with almost religious fanaticism. At other times, literary studies descend into nothing but investigations into literary theory itself. The results make many readers, editors, writers, and scholars wonder if anyone need bother to read fiction at all.

Literary theories exist for various genres and media, with each possessing discrete elements while overlapping each other. The purpose of this guide is mainly to explore fiction. One must also remember the warning of J. Berg Eisenwein in the opening of his classic essay “What is a Short Story” (1915): that “a definition is a dangerous thing,” and it will not serve anyone well to define terms too rigorously. For the purpose of this study, the phrase “critical approach” will be used for each literary theory.

I. HISTORICAL: This process involves the novel or story in its historical context. “Historical context” is broad in application. First, one must consider the time periods of the story itself and the composition dates. Social mores, philosophical movements, political tensions, war, and various musical, religious, economic, artistic and all other historical elements surrounding either the time in which the action is set or it was written. Some scholars include Literary Movements as part of the Historical Approach, while others, including the authors here, treat it as a separate approach. A number of scholars also include the Biographical Approach, which will be discussed later. Rene Wellek’s classic essay “Literary Movements and Periods” is especially important for understanding recent attitudes toward “Literary History.”

II. FORMALISTIC: “Art for art’s sake” adherents, like the Beat Generation writers, commonly make use of Formalism. Also known as “New Criticism” during the 1930’s, this critical process views fiction in isolation from its Historical, Biographical, and Social contexts. Readers or critics focus only on the work itself, treating it something like an archaeological or artistic artifact. Examination of *language* becomes foremost. The connotations of words and word groups are considered very important. The following include the most common type of Formalistic critical studies:

1. IMAGERY PATTERNS – Isolation and delineation of certain repeated images or word pictures. Studies like this account for critical studies on, for example, animal imagery, light imagery, color imagery, or any repeated motif which is repeated in a special manner to create any given effect. An example of an Imagery Pattern study would be Samuel Coleridge’s analysis

of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Coleridge observes that various characters comment that the kingly garments sit upon Macbeth like that of a giant's upon a dwarf, obviously meaning that Macbeth is too small a man to fill such a large political office.

2. STRUCTURAL PATTERNS – Analysis of the ways in which the parts or “building blocks” of the novel or story are juxtaposed and arranged. Elements such as framing, flashbacks, chapter arrangement, and so on are important in structural studies. *Catch 22* by Joseph Heller has been explored by its structural patterns, especially the use and arrangement of the many flashbacks.

3. STYLISTICS – Analysis of rhetorical patterns (length of sentences, adjective use or omission) becomes the mode for critical analysis. William Faulkner, in *Light in August*, mixes metaphors of distance and time. His central character, Joe Christmas, having killed his foster father in what could be considered self-defense, runs away “down the street. The street ran for fifteen years.” In general, Faulkner is known for the complexity of sentence structures as Hemingway is noted for his simplicity of sentence structures.

III. BIOGRAPHICAL – The critical process which focuses on the author's life and intellectual milieu in order to reach conclusions about the novel or story. What is the author's intentions or themes is a frequently asked question. Research includes investigation of the author's letters, influences, literary friendships, admiration's and antipathies (readers, critics, and scholars must be careful not to fall into the “Bibliographical Fallacy”). Donald Pike, the journalist turned scholar, reveals the importance and influences of Thomas Wolf's growing up in a boarding house upon the novel *Look Homeward, Angel*, but emphasizes the fictional nature of the novel. Hemingway proudly points out his observations of lives and events he witnessed are transformed into his stories. His observations, he maintains, were only sparks for creativity. The *Roman a Clef* (disguised autobiography) becomes a concern in this type of criticism.

IV. MODERNISM – Also known as Sociological, broadly defined, Modernism may refer to any focus on economic, political, social, or ethnic (a later generation added gender to this mix) grouping within the novel or story. For example, class grouping, or occupational groupings, or educational groupings may be defined and discussed in relation to each other. Some pervasive groupings and conflicts are as follows:

1. **RURAL-URBAN GROUPINGS** – An ancient source of conflict, the rural-urban (Pastoral–anti-pastoral) patterns is still important in modern fiction. Frank Norris' *The Octopus*, with its story of conflict between wheat farmers and the eastern railroads, lends itself to this inquiry.
2. **CLASS STRATIFICATION** – Rich–poor, lower-class – upper-class groupings tend to focus on the implications of economic and education.
3. **MARXIST CRITICISM** – Related to class, emphasis is on the conventional proletarian–capitalist, worker–bourgeois conflict of Marxist philosophy. Marxist critics often find these conflicts “buried” in the plotting and action of almost all art and literature.

For evaluation purposes, Marxist critics judge works on how much exploitation of the working class is revealed and/or how does the work of fiction advance teaching or educating Marxist thought and “advance the revolution.” As a rule, Marxist critics loathe Formalism.

4. **SOCIAL DARWINISM** – Related more to Spencer’s ideas of political, economic, and racial control and advancement of both individuals and groups, according to “survival of the fittest” (the phrase is misapplied to Charles Darwin). Writers and critics trace the implications of genetics and intelligence and education upon society. French and American writers like Jack London and Frank Norris also include some elements into literary Naturalism of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. A significant adherent of Social Darwinism was Zane Grey, whose characters found their roles in society determined by gender and race.

Modernism also sought to provide “modern” insights, views, stories, themes, and language into novels and stories.

V. Psychological – Based upon modern psychology, which is based upon classical common sense, emphasis is upon motivations of characters’ actions. Some basic psychological patterns of criticism are based on the following classic methods.

1. **FREUDIAN** – Studies are based on the conventions of terminology of Freud’s theories, including terminology such as *libido*, *id*, *ego*, *Oedipal Conflict*, *repression*, *latency*, and so on. Freudian studies are often used to explain sexual and social behavior as well as abnormal and aberrant behavior of characters. The use of the *libido* as the defining force of characters is given particular emphasis. Many feminist critics and writers, such as Erica Jong, oddly both use and condemn Freudism.
2. **JUNGAN Criticism** – Studies are based on the theories of Freud’s student and protégé, C. G. Jung, who carried Freud’s theories toward religious myths and mysticism. Extremely valuable in connection with **mythopoeic** criticism (see below), Jung’s terms and theories include the following: *anima* (female principle in the universe) and *animus* (masculine principle in the universe); the *collective unconscious*; the *undiscovered self*; and especially the *archetypal symbols*. Fairy tales and folk tales contain profound and deep seated meanings for life and art, according to Jung, in manner similar to Freud’s use of classical drama. Patterns such as youth-age, life-death, and seasonal dichotomies become very important in Jung’s theories. Similarly, the *femme fatale*, the “spiritual man,” the “father figure,” the “earth mother” become types pervading all art throughout the world.
3. **Gestalt and Transactional theories** – The theories of Erik Erikson and other eclectic psychologists are becoming important for literary criticism. The war novels of Tim O’Brien show how people learn, think, and reaction depends on the “fields” that they are in, such as peace or combat.

VI. Mythopoeic – Based primarily upon the theories of Northrup Frye, mythopoeic criticisms looks for classical prototypes and archetypes in modern fiction. Related to Jungian psychology

and frequently borrowing its terminology, mythopoeic criticism often goes back to Hebraic, Greek, and tribal myths (especially from the First Americans) for explanations of modern literature. This form of criticism is also heavily used in comparative literature and folklore studies. Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* is a classic in Mythopoeic criticism.

VII. Generic – The critical process whereby the work of fiction is related to literary *genres* (satire, lyric poetry, epic, short story, tragedy, mock-epic, parody, cinema, pastoral, morality play, and so on). This method tends to combine devices used by formalistic and historical criticism.

VIII. Textual and Bibliographical – The process whereby the critic analyzes and compares manuscripts, editions, deletions, revisions, and variations in order to reach conclusions regarding techniques and themes. A prime example would be the various editions of *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman. Whitman added, modified, and deleted (and later returned) various poems included in this monumental work over a period of twenty-five years.

IX. Media Theory – Most useful in contemporary criticism. The critic investigates the influences of non-print media upon fiction. The theories of Marshall McLuhan are important here, where the critic may discuss the impact of, let's say, television, cinema, videotape, computer programming, the visual arts, dance, and other media on the work of a particular artist. Even cartoons and comic books have affected the works of, for example, Thomas Pynchon and Donald Barthelme, and the movies of M. Night Shyamalan and Tim Burton. In recent decades, the impact of television and film has influenced plotting and narrative structures of many popular novelists including Jackie Collins, Harold Robbins, and Harper Lee. Traditional oral narratives of their native tribes heavily influence novels of Leslie Silko and Scott Momaday.

X. Eclectic – The process whereby two or more of critical approaches previously mentioned are joined to make a particular point about a novel or story.

XI. Impressionistic – A personal, original response to a work of literature based upon the reader's "impressions." That is, the reader's feelings and thoughts about any aspect of the work. The response may be either aesthetic (a reaction to the shape and imagery of the work, for instance), psychological (a reaction to the characters as persons, for instance), or any other. The emphasis is on audience response; however, Impressionistic is not quite the same as Reader-response as discussed below. The trick in writing impressionistic criticism is to narrow the topic to focus on some main concern. The result of such criticism may be the "appreciative essay," a valid form that is often neglected today. James Agee's film criticisms frequently follow this form.

XII. Reader-response – Similar in principle to Impressionistic in that it is a personal response to a literary work. Reader-response acknowledges that all readers bring their own "histories" to a work. The Historical approach is practically meaningless here; the author's intentions are irrelevant. Readers interpret literary works individually. A case in point comes from Homer. When Odysseus finally arrives home disguised as beggar, he is abused in his own palace. Homer, to a classicist, is developing themes upon the important Greek concepts of hospitality –

both as host and guest. To many American soldiers returning from World War II and particularly the Vietnam War, the reading's impact was vastly different: a soldier returns home, not only to be unrecognized but also to be abused in his own home by his (or her) countrymen. Different millennia, continents, and wars change how literary works are interpreted.

XIII. Deconstructuralism – Takes Reader-response, in a way, to an extreme. This approach recognizes only the reader's views as valid. All other considerations are not just ignored but repudiated. This extreme form of literary form acknowledged at one time that, for all practical purposes, the literary work itself does not exist – only the individual reader's views about it. All others are false. In the recent decade, this approach has been condemned as solipsistic, selfish, and blind. Only movie critics and older university teachers largely follow this approach.

XIV. Philosophical – Trends towards “Determinism,” “Existentialism,” “Absurdism,” “Anti-Aristotelianism,” “feminism” (which is also viewed a Sociological), and other “philosophical” constructs may used as a means of criticizing and approaching twentieth-century literature. Generally, one interprets and evaluates according to the individual philosophy.

XVI. Theological – Since much fiction is “theological” in the broadest sense, investigation into theology by means of literary investigation may be a separate approach. There has been in the previous decades a return to a Medieval critical approach as explained by the novelist and Oxford don J. R. R. Tolkien: During the Middle Ages, scholars could not help but notice what they observed as decidedly Christian elements in pagan and Islamic texts. They determined that, since all people are descendents of Eve, everyone reveals the “divine spark,” the *scintilla*. This divine spark shines – no matter how dimly – in all literature. This echoes of Jungian psychological approach. Other theological approaches include the evaluation and explication of literary works based upon individual religious doctrines. It would be difficult indeed to read a Flannery O'Connor's novels, such a *Wise Blood*, without the use of a Theological approach.

XVII. LITERARY MOVEMENTS – A classification approach that views a literary work as part of historical period, in which literary works cluster thematically and/or structurally. Examples include Romanticism, Realism, Naturalism, Realism, Modernism, Post-modernism, and so on. Works in each literary movement shares common elements such as themes and plots. Here we find overlapping approaches. Naturalism makes use of social Darwinism, for example. Also, note that Modernism is commonly treated as a distinct approach.

Afterword

None of the approaches above should be seen as rigid categories. There may be gradients among them all. Sometimes, semantics may thinly divide various critical approaches. As stated earlier, the use of literary criticism or theory can be uplifting and empowering. Finally, if a critical approach is interpreted as doctrine or exclusive, readers and critics run the risk of imprisoning literature or even their minds.