

Literary Criticism Explained: Critical Approaches to Literature

Literary criticism can broaden a reader's understanding of an author's work by summarizing, interpreting, and exploring its value.

Literary criticism is the practice of studying, evaluating, and interpreting works of literature. Similar to literary theory, which provides a broader philosophical framework for how to analyze literature, literary criticism offers readers new ways to understand an author's work. Examples of literary theories include new historicism, critical theory, and post-colonial theory.

The purpose of literary criticism is to broaden a reader's understanding of an author's work by summarizing, interpreting, and exploring its value. After giving the text a close reading, a critic formulates a comprehensive literary analysis that can inform or challenge another reader's understanding of the text. The practice of literary criticism creates space for readers to better understand the beauty and complexity of the world through literature.

Traditional Critical Approaches

1. **Historical-biographical criticism:** Historical-biographical criticism examines literature through the perspective of the author's historical context. This approach assumes that the significance of a particular piece of literature is inextricably linked to its historical context. For example, historical-biographical critics evaluate Shakespeare's work within the context of English literature, history, and culture during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.
2. **Moral-philosophical criticism:** This literary criticism style approaches literature based on its ethical merits. Moral-philosophical critics evaluate literary works based on the moral statements and judgments the characters and author express throughout the literary text.
3. **Sociological criticism:** Sociological criticism evaluates literature based on its relationship to society. The sociological criticism method examines the author's status in their society as well as the effect that the literary work had on its audience within the society. One form of sociological criticism is Marxist criticism, which examines how a specific work of literature affirms or rejects oppression within class systems.
4. **Psychoanalytic criticism:** This form of literary criticism examines literature based on the psychological desires and neuroses of the characters within a particular piece of literature. Psychoanalytic critics believe that an author's unconscious thoughts are expressed through their work.
5. **Practical criticism:** This study of literature encourages readers to examine the text without regard to any outside context—like the author, the date and place of writing, or any other contextual information that may enlighten the reader.
6. **Formalism:** Formalism compels readers to judge the artistic merit of literature by examining its formal elements, like language and technical skill. Formalism favors a literary canon of works that exemplify the highest standards of literature, as determined by formalist critics.
7. **Reader-response criticism:** Reader-response criticism is rooted in the belief that a reader's reaction to or interpretation of a text is as valuable a source of critical study as the text itself.
8. **New criticism:** New critics focused on examining the formal and structural elements of literature, as opposed to the emotional or moral elements. Poet T.S. Eliot and critics

Cleanth Brooks and John Crowe Ransom pioneered the approach in the mid-twentieth century.

9. **Post-structuralism:** Post-structuralist literary criticism abandoned ideas of formal and structural cohesion, questioning any assumed universal truths as reliant on the social structure that influenced them. One of the writers who shaped post-structuralist criticism is Roland Barthes—the father of semiotics, or the study of signs and symbols in art.
10. **Deconstruction:** Proposed by Jacques Derrida, deconstructionists pick apart a text’s ideas or arguments, looking for contradictions that render any singular reading of a text impossible.
11. **Feminist criticism:** As the feminist movement gained steam in the mid-twentieth century, literary critics began looking to gender studies for new modes of literary criticism. One of the earliest proponents of feminist criticism was Virginia Woolf in her seminal essay, *A Room of One's Own*. Other notable feminist critics include Elaine Showalter