BASIC INFORMATION

Critical Approaches/Perspectives enhance our understanding of a literary text by focusing on a particular element of it.

- Each approach has its advantages and limitations.
- Many approaches overlap and complement one another.

Pre-critical: This is not really a theory of literary criticism so much as the basic groundwork that must be done before any theory can be employed. A pre-critical reading is one that identifies the basics of plot, theme, character, setting, tone, atmosphere and the like. All readers, no matter how sophisticated, or unsophisticated, must read at this level if what they read is to make any sense.

TYPES OF CRITICISM

FORMALIST APPROACH

Formalist Criticism emphasizes the form of a literary work to determine its meaning, focusing on literary elements and how they work to create meaning. Formalist criticism...

- examines a text as independent from its time period, social setting, and author’s background. A text is an independent entity, a work of art in its own right.
- focuses on close readings of texts and analysis of the effects of literary elements and techniques on the text.
- assumes that form and content cannot be separated because all of the elements of a text influence each other.

Two Major Principles of Formalism

1. A literary text exists independent of any particular reader and, in a sense, has a fixed meaning.
2. The greatest literary texts are “timeless” and “universal.”

ARCHETYPAL APPROACH

Mythological / Archetypal assumes that there is a collection of symbols, images, characters, and motifs (i.e. archetypes) that evokes basically the same response in all people. Archetypes are the unknowable basic forms personified or concretized in recurring images, symbols, or patterns which may include motifs such as the quest or the heavenly ascent, recognizable character types such as the trickster or the hero, symbols such as the apple or snake, or images such as crucifixion.

HISTORICAL APPROACHES

Historicist Criticism focuses on the historic cultural and social factors that influenced a text as well as how those factors manifest themselves in the text. Historicist criticism...

- Synthesizes factual data from various sources to interpret a literary work
- Focuses on details within a text that give insight into a cultural time period, and/or how a cultural time period is revealed by details in the text
- Seeks to understand a text’s original meaning within its original context
- Might evaluate the impact of a literary work on readers in subsequent eras in order to understand how the perceived meaning, reception, and significance of a work evolve over time

Biographical Criticism analyzes the life/biography of an author to show the relationship between the author’s life and his/her work(s)

- Uses an author’s life to explain meaning in an author’s work
SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACHES

Sociological Criticism argues that social contexts (the social environment) must be considered when analyzing a text.

- Focuses on the values of a society and how those views are reflected in a text
- Emphasizes the economic, political, and cultural issues within literary texts
- Core Belief: Literature is a reflection of its society.

TYPES OF SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACHES

1. Marxist Criticism emphasizes economic and social conditions. It is based on the political theory of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, and it focuses on a text’s ideological content – its assumptions and values regarding issues like culture, race, class, and power. Marxist criticism...
   - is concerned with understanding the role of power, politics, & money in culture as demonstrated through literature
   - examines literature to see how it reflects...
     - the way in which dominant groups (typically, the majority) exploit the subordinate groups (typically, the minority).
     - the way in which people become alienated from one another through power, money, and politics.

2. Gender Criticism explores how gender influences the creation and reception of literary works.

3. Feminist Criticism is concerned with the role, position, and influence of women in a literary text. Feminist criticism...
   - asserts that most “literature” throughout time has been written by men, for men.
   - examines the way that the female consciousness is depicted by both male and female writers.
   - seeks to understand literary representations of women and the ways in which males and females write about each other.

   Four Basic Principles of Feminist Criticism
   - Western civilization is patriarchal.
   - The concepts of gender are mainly cultural ideas created by patriarchal societies.
   - Patriarchal ideals pervade literature.
   - Most literature through time has been gender-biased

PSYCHOLOGICAL/PSYCHOANALYTIC APPROACH

Psychological/Psychoanalytic Criticism views a text as a revelation of its author’s mind and personality. It is largely based on the work of Sigmund Freud.

- Also focuses on the hidden motivations of literary characters
- Looks at literary characters and texts as a reflection of the writer

Three Approaches to Psychological Criticism

1. Investigation of the creative process of the arts – What is the nature of literary genius, and how does it relate to normal mental functions? How does a particular work register its impact on the reader’s mental and sensory faculties?
2. Psychological study of the artist/writer
3. Analysis of fictional characters – the use of modern insights on human behavior to study how fictional people act.

Ultimately, psychological criticism involves speculating on what lies underneath the text – the unspoken or perhaps unspeakable memories, motives, and fears that covertly shape the work, especially in fictional characterization.
NOTE: This is just a simplified sampling of some literary theories, not an exhaustive list. There are many others to explore and apply to a wide range of texts.

Psychological Theories for Use in Psychological/Psychoanalytic Criticism

English II Pre-AP – Literary Criticism and Theory

ABRAHAM MASLOW AND THE HIERARCHY OF NEEDS

Abraham Maslow: American psychologist who studied human behavior and placed a good deal of emphasis on both the highs and lows of humanity. He believed that people are basically trustworthy, self-protecting, and self-governing

KEY IDEA: Human beings are motivated by unsatisfied needs

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs

▶ Basic Needs

1. Physiological Needs:
   • Food, Water, Warmth, Rest
   • All Biological Needs
   • Strongest Needs

   • Security, Safety
   • Mostly Psychological

▶ Psychological Needs

3. Needs for Love, Affection, and Belongingness
   • Intimate Relationships, Friends
   • Seeking to Overcome Loneliness and Isolation

4. Needs for Esteem
   • Prestige, Feeling of Accomplishment, Self-Esteem, Esteem from Others

▶ Self-fulfillment Needs

5. Needs for Self-Actualization

LAWRENCE KOHLBERG AND THE THEORY OF MORAL DEVELOPMENT

Lawrence Kohlberg: American psychologist. His unpublished PhD dissertation for the University of Chicago (1958) focused on expanding the earlier work of Jean Piaget (1932), which worked to understand and identify the moral development of children.

The Stages of Moral Development

▶ Level 1: Preconventional Morality

- Stage 1: Obedience and Punishment Orientation
  - Assumes that rules are fixed by powerful authorities and must be unquestioningly obeyed
  - Concern is with what authorities permit and punish
  - Punishment is tied up in the child’s mind with wrongness

- Stage 2: Individualism and Exchange
  - Recognize there is not just one right view handed down by authorities
  - Each person is free to pursue his/her individual interests, so everything is relative
  - “Right” = what meets one’s own self-interests
Punishment is a risk that one wants to avoid

Level 2: Conventional Morality
- **Stage 3: Good Interpersonal Relationships**
  - People should live up to the expectations of family/community
  - People should behave in “good” ways
  - Good ways = good motives, intentions, and feelings
- **Stage 4: Maintaining the Social Order**
  - More concerned with society as a whole
  - Emphasis on obeying laws, respecting authority, and performing one’s duties so that the social order is maintained; desire is to keep society functioning
  - Thinking is from a full-fledged, member-of-society perspective

Level 3: Postconventional Morality
- **Stage 5: Social Contract and Individual Rights**
  - Independently considers what morals and values a society OUGHT to uphold
  - Believe that a good society is based on a social contract where people freely work for the benefit of all
  - Believe that despite different values, all rational people agree on protection of basic rights and democratic procedures for changing unfair laws and improving society
- **Stage 6: Universal Principles**
  - Defines the principles by which we achieve justice
  - Looks through the eyes of others to determine justice

SIGMUND FREUD AND THE HUMAN MIND

**Sigmund Freud**: the “father of psychoanalysis;” argued that the human mind contains three psychic zones, which dictate mental function and motivation. Freud began developing his theories in the late 19th century, and they reached prominence in the early 20th century.

**Id** = source of drive for pleasure
- Fulfills “the pleasure principle”
- Totally subconscious
- Amoral and lawless—no ethics or values, no knowledge of good or evil
- Demands pleasurable gratification at any cost
- No impulse for self-preservation

**Ego** = source of reality
- The “reality principle”
- Governs the id and channels the id’s desires into socially acceptable outlets

**Superego** = source of ethics
- The “morality principle”
- Home of conscience and pride
- Represses things from the id that the ego cannot divert