



## Literary Criticism: Questions for a Variety of Literary Approaches



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## SUGGESTED USES:

### LITERARY CRITICISM

#### Activities:

\* This document can be used as a handout/working document that student reference when needed.

**\*Use for analysis of readings, regardless of genre.**

\*Assign one type of Literary Criticism for the whole class or per group.

\*Assign small readings for students to discuss the type of LITERARY CRITICISM depicted.

#### PROJECTS:

1. Using index cards, students create NOTE CARDS with LITERARY CRITICISM on front and definition with example on the back for students to study.

2. At any point after students complete NOTE CARDS, they exchange cards randomly to analyze a piece of writing.

# What is Literary Criticism?

- Literary Criticism is the art or practice of judging and commenting on the qualities and character of literary works.
- The primary function of literary criticism is to **interpret literature in a way that will increase understanding**, according to the English department of Georgia Perimeter College. Literary criticism began in 19th century Europe among the bourgeois class, writes Professor Terry Eagleton of the University of Manchester in "The Function of Criticism: From the Spectator to Post-Structuralism." Academics in the literary, political and philosophical fields assembled to discuss literature and apply the resulting ideas to their areas of interest.
- By reading and discussing literature, **we expand our imagination, our sense of what is possible, and our ability to empathize with others.** Improve your ability to read critically and interpret texts while gaining appreciation for different literary genres and theories of interpretation.

# Literary Criticism: Questions for a Variety of Approaches

## I. Formalistic Approach:

This approach focuses on form. The analysis stresses items like symbols, images, and structure and how one part of the work relates to other parts and to the whole.

- A. How is the work's structure unified?
- B. How do various elements of the work reinforce its meaning?
- C. What recurring patterns (repeated or related words, images, etc.) can you find? What is the effect of these patterns or motifs?
- D. How does repetition reinforce the theme(s)?
- E. How does the writer's diction reveal or reflect the work's meaning?
- F. What is the effect of the plot, and what parts specifically produce that effect?
- G. What figures of speech are used? (metaphors, similes, etc.)
- H. Note the writer's use of paradox, irony, symbol, plot, characterization, and style of narration. What effects are produced? Do any of these relate to one another or to the theme?
- I. Is there a relationship between the beginning and the end of the story?
- J. What tone and mood are created at various parts of the work?
- K. How does the author create tone and mood? What relationship is there between tone and mood and the effect of the story?
- L. How do the various elements interact to create a unified whole?

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## II. Philosophical Approach

This approach focuses on themes, view of the world, moral statements, author's philosophy, etc.

- A. What view of life does the story present? Which character best articulates this viewpoint?
- B. According to this work's view of life, what is mankind's relationship to God? To the universe?
- C. What moral statement, if any, does this story make? Is it explicit or implicit?
- D. What is the author's attitude toward his world? Toward fate? Toward God?
- E. What is the author's conception of good and evil?
- F. What does the work say about the nature of good or evil?
- G. What does the work say about human nature?



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## III. Biographical Approach:

Focuses on connection of work to author's personal experiences.

- A. What aspects of the author's personal life are relevant to this story?
- B. Which of the author's stated beliefs are reflected in the work?
- C. Does the writer challenge or support the values of her contemporaries?
- D. What seem to be the author's major concerns? Do they reflect any of the writer's personal experiences?
- E. Do any of the events in the story correspond to events experienced by the author?
- F. Do any of the characters in the story correspond to real people?

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## IV. Historical Approach:

This approach focuses on connection of work to the historical period in which it was written; literary historians attempt to connect the historical background of the work to specific aspects of the work.

- A. How does it reflect the time in which it was written?
- B. How accurately does the story depict the time in which it is set?
- C. What literary or historical influences helped to shape the form and content of the work?
- D. How does the story reflect the attitudes and beliefs of the time in which it was written or set?  
(Consider beliefs and attitudes related to race, religion, politics, gender, society, philosophy, etc.)
- E. What other literary works may have influenced the writer?
- F. What historical events or movements might have influenced this writer?
- G. How would characters and events in this story have been viewed by the writer's contemporaries?
- H. Does the story reveal or contradict the prevailing values of the time in which it was written?  
Does it provide an opposing view of the period's prevailing values?
- I. How important is it the historical context (the work's and the reader's) to interpreting the work?



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## V. Psychological Approach:

This approach focuses on the psychology of characters.

- A. What forces are motivating the characters?
- B. Which behaviors of the characters are conscious ones?
- C. Which are unconscious?
- D. What conscious or unconscious conflicts exist between the characters?
- E. Given their backgrounds, how plausible is the characters' behavior?
- F. Are the theories of Freud or other psychologists applicable to this work? To what degree?
- G. Do any of the characters correspond to the parts of the tripartite self? (Id, ego, superego)
- H. What roles do psychological disorders and dreams play in this story?
- I. Are the characters recognizable psychological types?
- J. How might a psychological approach account for different responses in female and male readers?
- K. How does the work reflect the writer's personal psychology?
- L. What do the characters' emotions and behaviors reveal about their psychological states?
- M. How does the work reflect the unconscious dimensions of the writer's mind?
- N. How does the reader's own psychology affect his response to the work?

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## VI. Sociological Approach:

This approach focuses on man's relationship to others in society, politics, religion, race, gender/sexual identity, and business.

- A. What is the relationship between the characters and their society?
- B. Does the story address societal issues, such as race, gender, and class?
- C. How do social forces shape the power relationships between groups or classes of people in the story? Who has the power, and who doesn't? Why?
- D. How does the story reflect the Great American Dream?
- E. How does the story reflect urban, rural, or suburban values?
- F. What does the work say about economic or social power? Who has it and who doesn't? Any Marxist leanings evident?
- G. Does the story address issues of economic exploitation? What role does money play?
- H. How do economic conditions determine the direction of the characters' lives?
- I. Does the work challenge or affirm the social order it depicts?
- J. Can the protagonist's struggle be seen as symbolic of a larger class struggle? How does the microcosm (small world) of the story reflect the macrocosm (large world) of the society in which it was composed?
- K. Do any of the characters correspond to types of government, such as a dictatorship, democracy, communism, socialism, fascism, etc.? What attitudes toward these political structures/systems are expressed in the work?

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## VII. Archetypal Approach:

This approach focuses on connections to other literature, mythological/biblical allusions, archetypal images, symbols, characters, and themes.

- A. How does this story resemble other stories in plot, character, setting, or symbolism?
- B. What universal experiences are depicted?
- C. Are patterns suggested? Are seasons used to suggest a pattern or cycle?
- D. Does the protagonist undergo any kind of transformation, such as movement from innocence to experience, that seems archetypal?
- E. Are the names significant?
- F. Is there a Christ-like figure in the work?
- G. Does the writer allude to biblical or mythological literature? For what purpose?
- H. What aspects of the work create deep universal responses to it?
- I. How does the work reflect the hopes, fears, and expectations of entire cultures (for example, the ancient Greeks)?
- J. How do myths attempt to explain the unexplainable: origin of man? Purpose and destiny of human beings?
- K. What common human concerns are revealed in the story?
- L. How do stories from one culture correspond to those of another? (For example, creation myths, flood myths, etc.)
- M. How does the story reflect the experiences of death and rebirth?
- N. What archetypal events occur in the story? (Quest? Initiation? Scapegoating? Descents into the underworld? Ascents into heaven?)
- O. What archetypal images occur? (Water, rising sun, setting sun, symbolic colors)
- P. What archetypal characters appear in the story? (Mother Earth? Femme Fatal? Wise old man? Wanderer?)
- Q. What archetypal settings appear? (Garden? Desert?)
- R. How and why are these archetypes embodied in the work?

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## VIII. Feminist Criticism: :

This approach examines images of women and concepts of the feminine in myth and literature; uses the psychological, archetypal, and sociological approaches; often focuses on female characters who have been neglected in previous criticism. Feminist critics attempt to correct or supplement what they regard as a predominantly male-dominated critical perspective.

- A. How are women's lives portrayed in the work?
- B. Is the form and content of the work influenced by the writer's gender?
- C. How do male and female characters relate to one another? Are these relationships sources of conflict? Are these conflicts resolved?
- D. Does the work challenge or affirm traditional views of women?
- E. How do the images of women in the story reflect patriarchal social forces that have impeded women's efforts to achieve full equality with men?
- F. What marital expectations are imposed on the characters? What effect do these expectations have?
- G. What behavioral expectations are imposed on the characters? What effect do these expectations have?
- H. If a female character were male, how would the story be different (and vice versa)?
- I. How does the marital status of a character affect her decisions or happiness?

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## IX. Reader-Response Criticism:

This type of criticism attempts to describe what happens in the reader's mind while interpreting a text.

- A. How are lives portrayed in the work?
- B. Does the writer know who his audience is?
- C. How do the characters relate to one another? Do these relationships verisimilitude? Are these conflicts like ours?
- D. How does this writing make the reader feel? What emotions does it cater to?
- E. How do the images in the writing create a visual for the reader?
- F. What behavioral expectations are imposed on the readers? What effect do these expectations have on society?
- G. Does this writing cause readers to:
  - a. make connections for readers
  - b. be about people and the human condition
  - c. stir emotions and provoke thought
  - d. cause social and/or political change
- H. How does this work allow readers to reflect on their lives?
- I. How does this work reflect human condition? How are we better people because of this work?
- J. How does this work reflect social condition? How is society a better place?

# Literary Criticism: Questions for a Variety of Approaches

## X. Mythological criticism

Mythological critics explore the universal patterns underlying a literary work.

- A. This type of criticism draws on the insights of anthropology, history, psychology, and comparative religion to explore how a text uses myths and symbols drawn from different cultures and epochs.
- B. A central concept in mythological criticism is the archetype, a symbol, character, situation, or image that evokes a deep universal response. For example, critic Joseph Campbell, in his books like *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, demonstrates how similar mythic characters and situations, like the hero's journey, appear in virtually every culture.
- C. What are the mythological aspects reflected in the writing that allows clarity to the current themes?
- D. Does delving into a mythic culture allow deep connections for the reader?



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## XI. Psychoanalytic Criticism:

This type of criticism views the themes, conflicts, and characterizations of a work primarily as a reflection of the needs, emotions, states of mind, or subconscious desires of the author.

- A. How is the writer's life portrayed in the work?
- B. Is the form and content of the work influenced by the writer's life?
- C. What decisions in their lives prompted the work?
- D. Does the writer's life parallel the characters'?
- E. What message is the writer sending about his own life?
- F. How much of the work is autobiographical? Is the writer completely forthcoming or



# THE PROJECTS

Literary Criticism:  
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## LITERARY CRITICISM STUDY CARDS

**Using index cards,  
students create STUDY  
CARDS with LITERARY  
CRITICISM on front and  
definition with example  
on the back for students  
to study.**





# LITCRIT CHECK!

At any point after students complete STUDY CARDS, they exchange cards randomly to any other classmate to analyze a piece of writing, looking at the writing through the lens of the given card. A discussion with the original creator of the card may ensue afterwards.



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