

Literary Criticism as a Tool for Interpreting Literature

What Is Interpretation?

In general, to interpret something is to make it personally meaningful. Our brain takes raw data from the senses and makes it meaningful by relating it to our previous experiences. We may, for example, respond to a loud noise by saying "That sounded like a gunshot." When we read or hear a sentence, we put the words together into a meaningful whole, rather than just noting their separate dictionary definitions. Most everyday language is fairly straightforward and requires little interpretation. A liberal and a conservative who read a newspaper editorial against the death penalty may disagree with each other on that particular issue, but (unless the editorial is badly written) they will agree that the writer is against capital punishment. That is, they won't have different interpretations of what the article means. Language usually requires special interpretation, however, when it is ambiguous or unclear. In order to clarify a sarcastic statement, for example, we may ask a question like "What did you mean by that remark?" or "Are you serious?" Because literature (other than propaganda) presents us with more than one possible meaning, interpreting literature requires more care and attention than does responding to an essay. Approaching literature with an inquiring attitude helps maintain this fruitful complexity.

What Kinds of Questions Help with Interpretation?

Specific questions that allow only one answer (like "What is the main character's nickname?") may enable a teacher to see if a student has read or studied a story, but they rarely challenge the reader to see beyond the plot level. Because they respect the complexity of your own experience and the author's vision, open-ended questions are much more useful. After seeing the film *Schindler's List*, in which the protagonist changes from a greedy businessman to the compassionate savior of over a thousand Jews in Nazi-held Poland, you might ask "How and why does Schindler change?" Or you might reflect on your own values: "How would I react in this situation?" Clearly there is no single answer for this kind of question, and your answer may change each time you read or think about the work.

Why Should We Interpret Literature?

Although the interpretation of literature can be challenging, it may also provide unique and important rewards. Authors of fiction, poetry, or drama choose literature for their expression because they believe that there are at least two valid sides to any major issue--not just a simple right and wrong. Reading and interpreting literature, then, nourishes us with a sense of the complexity of life's deepest mysteries-- love, hate, death, conflicts between the individual and society, and so on--so that when we approach these problems we do so with greater self-awareness and greater tolerance for the views of others. We may react angrily to a news feature about physically abused children, but when we read a story like James Joyce's "Counterparts" we are asked to understand (without necessarily excusing such an action) the reasons why an adult would hit a harmless child. When we interpret literature at this level, we are taking what we already know about human nature and adding in the experience and wisdom of the author (even if we don't share all of the author's convictions). Interpretation then is a social act--we bring to it all of our past experiences with people, and we come away with an even richer, more complex understanding.

What Is Literary Criticism?

Literary criticism is an extension of this social activity of interpreting. One reader writes down his or her views on what a particular work of literature means so that others can respond to that interpretation. The critic's specific purpose may be to make value judgements on a work, to explain his or her interpretation of the work, or to provide other readers with relevant historical or biographical information. The critic's general purpose, in most cases, is to enrich the reader's understanding of the literary work. Critics typically engage in dialogue or debate with other critics, using the views of other critics to develop their own points. Unfortunately, when critics assume that their readers are already familiar with previous criticism, the argument may be difficult to follow.

Why Is Criticism Important for Students?

As a reader of literature, you may find the views of others very helpful in developing your own interpretations. When you write an essay about literature, you will also find criticism helpful for supporting your points. But criticism should never be a substitute for your own original views--only in very rare cases would an assignment require you to summarize a critical work without including your interpretation of the literature. Besides being useful, good literary criticism can be fun in itself, like listening to and participating in a lively discussion among friends. By reading the critic, you add yet another point of view to yours and the author's.

Is All Literary Criticism Valid?

Certainly if a critic has added to your appreciation of a literary work, then that person has been useful. But as you read a variety of criticism on a given author, you will discover that some criticism more useful than others, and you may find some completely useless, particularly if it only summarizes the plot, focuses on an issue you're not interested in, concentrates too much on other critics or theories and not on the literature itself, or uses an unnecessarily technical vocabulary. As in all fields, there are those whose main goal seems to be to confuse or impress rather than to communicate. Still, an article or book that at first seems difficult or irrelevant may be very valuable in supporting your opinion once you see the overall picture. Since your goal in reading the article is to enrich your view, you may find only part of the argument valid, and you may even challenge the views of other critics as a means of explaining and developing your own views.

When Do I Use Criticism?

Occasionally, you may want to begin with some preliminary literary research to make sure that there is enough critical commentary available, particularly if you're considering writing about a recent author. You may also want to basic overview or article in a reference work before beginning to read and interpret a particularly difficult work. Nevertheless, it's usually best not to worry about literary criticism until you've already developed your own basic interpretation of the work. If you later find a critic who arrives at the same conclusion you've reached, you can still use that critic as support. Remember that the main purpose of your writing is to express and support your views on the original literature, not to quote as many critics as possible.

How Do I Incorporate Literary Criticism into My Paper?

Just as it's usually best to read criticism after you've developed your own views, so do you normally refer to or quote criticism after you've expressed an idea of your own. A typical paragraph may consist of a topic sentence (expressing a portion or subtopic of your interpretation), followed by an elaboration of the idea, a reference to or brief quote from the work that you're analyzing, an explanation of how this passage illustrates your point, a quote or reference from a critic on this passage (or a similar one), and perhaps a brief discussion of the critic's comments. In our reader, *Literature and Ourselves*, you'll find several casebooks, containing essays about works of literature (the casebooks are on gray pages). Each casebook has a student essay that uses literary criticism for support. Notice how the most important part of every student paper is the student's own ideas--the criticism is used within the body paragraphs to support the student's ideas. Although there is no single best way to incorporate literary criticism into our paper, it would be unusual to base a long section of your paper solely on quotations or paraphrases from others.

How to Find Literary Criticism

You'll probably start your search with an index or bibliography that targets the humanities. An all-purpose index like the Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature does include articles about literature, but these tend to be reviews from popular magazines. The two most useful indexes are the Humanities Index and the MLA Bibliography, which are available both in book form and electronically.

Book Form vs. Electronic Form

Although simpler, searching through books rather than computer databases has several disadvantages. First, since print indexes consist of separate quarterly or annual volumes, you have to repeat the same search many times. A computer database may let you search through 10-20 years of indexes by entering a single command or search word. Book indexes have rather limited subject headings, while computer databases let you choose not only subject but also key words (which are much less restrictive than subject headings). Computer searches also let you combine subjects and key words. For example, if you were using a print index to find material on flower imagery in Shakespeare's poetry, you might have to browse through all articles and books on Shakespeare's poetry (perhaps as many as 50 per year). A computer search, on the other hand, would allow you to type in Shakespeare and poetry and flower to find only the relevant information. Still there are times when you may need to use print indexes (or a combination of electronic and print), particularly if the electronic version does not go back far enough in time to cover enough major criticism.

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