



Introduction to Literary Criticism

Definition and Use

- “Literary criticism” is the name given to works written by experts who critique—analyze—an author’s work.
- It does NOT mean “to criticize” as in complain or disapprove.
- Literary criticism is often referred to as a “secondary source”.

Definition and Use

- Literary criticism is often referred to as a “secondary source”, because it is used to analyze your primary work—the work or text (novel) you are reading.
- Literary criticism is used by people who want to use an expert’s opinion to support their own ideas.

Definition and Use

- Remember, literary criticism is used by readers to analyze, NOT by authors to write.
- Therefore, when you begin to analyze your novel, you'll make use of expert, reliable literary criticism to support your opinion—your thesis—which you will develop for your paper.

Literary Criticism and Theory

- Any piece of text can be read with a number of different sets of “glasses,” meaning you are looking for different things within the text.
- Literary criticism helps readers understand a text in relation to the author, culture, and other texts.



The Most Common Critical Stances for Literature

- Formalistic
- Biographical
- Historical/Cultural
- Psychological
- Mythological
- Gender
- Deconstructionist



Upon Seeing an Orange

- Gender Theory – What possibilities are available to a woman who eats this orange? To a man?
- Formalism – What shape and diameter is the orange?
- Marxist Theory – Who owns this orange? Who gets to eat it?



Orange cont'd

- Postcolonial Theory – Who owns the orange? Who took it away?
- Reader Response Theory – What does the orange taste like? What does the orange remind the reader of?
- Psychological/Psychoanalytical – I want this orange now! Will I get in trouble if I eat it?

Formalist Criticism

- A formalist reading of a text focuses on symbol, metaphor, imagery, characterization, and so on.
- Formalism ignores the author's biography and focuses only on the interaction of literary elements within the text.
- Consider the elements of plot, narrator, structure, etc.
- It's what you do most often in English literature.



A Formalist Reading of “The Three Little Pigs”

- What does the wolf symbolize?
- Notice the consonance/rhyme of “I’ll *huff* and I’ll *puff...*”
- How does the story foreshadow the final fate of the pigs?
- What does the wolf’s dialogue tell us about his character?

Biographical Criticism

- As the name suggests, this type of criticism reads the text looking for the author's influence.
- By examining the author's life, we can have a deeper understanding of his/her writing.



A Biographical Reading of *To Build a Fire* by Jack London

- London grew up in poverty and lived on the streets of San Francisco so he likely had a negative view of city life. We also know that he found peace and “breathing room” in Alaska.
- The settings and circumstances in “To Build a Fire” reflect the feelings above. (ie.-the Naturalist idea that nature is indifferent = effects of his early life on him and setting = his love of Alaska/the wilderness)

Historical/Cultural Criticism

- This critical viewpoint examines a text in relation to its historical or cultural backdrop.
- You may examine a text's effect on history or culture or vice versa.
- A historical/cultural analysis is often very similar to a biographical analysis, and it's possible to view history, culture, and biography in a single essay.

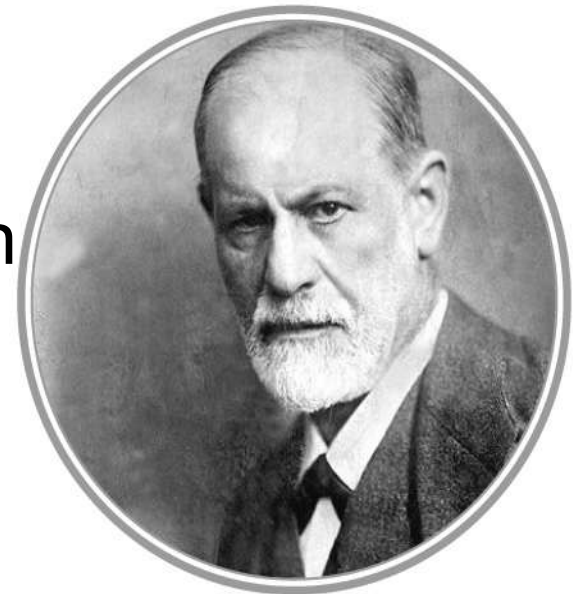
Historical/Cultural Reading of Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* (1959)



- What can *Sleeping Beauty* reveal about 1950s society?
- How do Prince Phillip's lines and the "Sword of Truth" reflect the ideals of 1950s Americans?

Psychological Criticism

- Psychological critical theory applies the theories of psychology to a text in order to better understand its characters.
- Based largely on the theories of neurologist Sigmund Freud, this theory hinges on an examination of people's (characters') unconscious desires.



Psychological Criticism

- What governs human behavior?
 - Id – the animal nature that says, “Do what feels good.”
 - Ego – the reality-based part of your personality that makes decisions to satisfy the Id and Superego
 - Superego – the socialized “conscience” that tells you what’s right or fair



Psychological Criticism

Oedipus Complex – Every boy has the unconscious desire to please his mother; consequently, sons are afraid of their fathers, and fathers are threatened by their sons.

Elektra Complex – Every *daughter* has the unconscious desire to please her father; consequently, daughters are deeply afraid of their mothers, and mothers are deeply threatened by their daughters.



Psychological Criticism



- Of course, these complexes have their origins in literature and mythology.
- Psychological criticism is a way to understand characters, not diagnose them.

A Psychological Reading of *Macbeth*

- Macbeth kills King Duncan because he unconsciously recognizes the king as a father-figure. Hence, Duncan is a rival for power and the affections of the people.
- In the latter acts of the play, Macbeth has indulged his id so often that his ego has lost the ability to restrain it.

Mythological Criticism

- This stance is *not* about mythology.
- It is about the universal elements of human life that are common in all cultures.
- Like ancient mythology, literature is a window to creating meaning for human life.
- In other words, stories make us feel like our lives are more significant.

Mythological Criticism

- Central to mythological theory are archetypes.
- Remember, archetypes are those universal elements present in the literature of all cultures.



Mythological Criticism

- Mythological Criticism seeks to understand how the story constructs meaning in the human existence through archetypes.
- For example, note the ways texts have examined betrayal.



Mythological Criticism

● Common Archetypes

- The Hero = Beowulf, Spiderman, Luke Skywalker, *Braveheart*
- The Outcast = *Macbeth's* clown, *Lord of the Flies*, Cain
- The Quest = *LOTR*, *Star Wars*, *Beowulf*
- Sacrificial King = Jesus, *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*, *LOTR*
- Evil Personified = Wicked Witch of the West, the Devil, the Emperor in *SW*

Gender Criticism

- Gender criticism analyzes literature through the lens of socially-constructed gender roles.
- The largest part of gender criticism is feminism, which critiques and seeks to correct women's subordination to men in society.
- In its most basic form, feminism is about equality.

Gender Criticism

- A newer segment of gender criticism is looks for the influence of homosexuality within texts.
- Research of this type is fairly difficult because homosexuality was largely suppressed in Europe and America, and it hasn't been openly discussed until the last few decades.

A Feminist Reading of *Cinderella*

- As a single, young woman, Cinderella is without means or opportunity because she is unattached to a father or a husband.
- It is only through the magic of a fairy godmother that she can be made presentable and meet the prince AND he is the only means of her escaping her plight.
- What skills does she have? She is beautiful, can sing well, and is kind. These are highlighted as the desirable qualities in a woman (hence, her UGLY, UNTALENTED, stepsisters who are portrayed as undesirable).

Marxist Criticism

- Bases approach largely on works of Karl Marx (1818-1883) German political philosopher.
- Investigates assumptions and values associated with culture, race, class.
- For example: Are the rich always good or bad? Are the poor always good or bad?

Marxist Criticism

- Explores the power struggles of those who are minorities in dominant culture.
- Examines who has/does not have **power**, how they attained it/why they don't have it, and what they do with it/how they are manipulated by it.

Marxist Criticism

- Believes that literature is essentially political; it either supports or refutes economic oppression. In other words, the author either reinforces the *status quo* or rebels against it.

Literary Criticism

- Remember, one need not be a Marxist to use a Marxist approach, any more than one needs to be a woman to use a feminist approach.
- Any critic can take any approach that helps him/her explain what they think the author is saying in his/her work.

Literary Criticism

- Once you have decided what you think the author of your novel is saying—what his/her message is—you can then decide on which critical approach you think will work best to support your opinion.

More Literary Theory

- New ways of viewing literature (and the world) continue to develop, but these are the main theories with which you'll come in contact.



Deconstructionist Criticism

- Deconstructionism argues that since there is no single meaning of any word, there can be no single meaning of a text.
- EVERY text, therefore, has multiple valid meanings because the reader may interpret the words differently than the writer intended them.



Deconstructionist Criticism

- Much literary criticism is about construction of a larger meaning from a text.
- Deconstructionism emphasizes the breakdown of any meaning within a text because of the variety of different readers.

Deconstructionism



- "It depends on what the meaning of the word 'is' is."
 - Bill Clinton, during his 1998 grand jury testimony on the Monica Lewinsky affair

Deconstructionism



- Idea that because there is no concrete meaning of ***anything***, there is no single truth applicable to all human beings.
- Hence, everything is relative.

A Deconstructionist Reading of “The Tortoise and the Hare” (very basic)

- The homophone hare/hair could make this fable incomprehensible without pictures.
- In Native American cultures, the tortoise is a symbol of honor, so Indians would interpret the “race” as a contest of honor and fair play instead of endurance.

