

Literary Theories & Schools of Criticism

Introduction

- Examining these theories are intended as tools for your “tool box” when discussing or writing about literature. None of them are the end-all be-all of analysis, but are meant as stepping stones or ideas that you could use to help you understand or discuss works.
- Literary theories are like lenses
 - How critics view and discuss literature, art, and culture
 - Each assumes basic ideas or tenants of the school of criticism, focusing on one aspect of a work

****Biographical Information:** Not technically a school or theory. We will, *occasionally*, consider the author’s life, and examine how his or her background and beliefs influenced the work.

Timeline

(Most overlap)

- Moral Criticism, Dramatic Construction (~360 BC-present)
- Formalism (1930s-present)
- Psychoanalytic Criticism (1930s-present)
- Marxist Criticism (1930s-present)
- Reader-Response Criticism (1960s-present)
- Feminist and Gender Criticism (1960s-present)
- Biographical**

Moral Criticism and Dramatic Construction (~360 BC-present)

1. Plato
 - a. *The Republic*, first literary criticism.
 - b. Dialog between Socrates and two of his associates concludes that art must play a limited and very strict role in the perfect Greek Republic.
 - i. Richter summarizes: "...poets may stay as servants of the state if they teach piety and virtue, but the pleasures of art are condemned as inherently corrupting to citizens...."
 - c. Plato believed that art was a mediocre reproduction of nature
 - i. "...what artists do...is hold the mirror up to nature: They copy the appearances of men, animals, and objects in the physical world...and the intelligence that went into its creation need involve nothing more than conjecture."
 - d. If art teaches no ethics, then it's damaging to its audience, & for Plato this damaged his Republic.
 - e. Scholars who critique work based on whether or not the story teaches a moral are few - virtue may have an impact on children's literature, however.
2. Aristotle
 - a. Poetry (and rhetoric) as a productive science (poetry and drama as means to an end (for example, an audience's enjoyment))
 - b. Basic guidelines to achieve certain objectives
 - i. Principles of dramatic construction influence the audience's catharsis (pity and fear) or satisfaction with the work
 1. "...language, rhythm, and harmony..."
 2. "...plot, character, thought, diction, song, and spectacle..."
 - c. One of the earliest attempts to explain what makes an effective or ineffective work of literature.

Moral Criticism

What's the lesson here?

Dramatic Construction

How well does it affect us?

Typical thought:

- Moral critics ask what the moral value of the work is and accept it or reject it based upon its compatibility with their moral code or beliefs.
- Dramatic constructionists ask if the work meets criteria by which it should be judged (how effective it is in achieving certain objectives).

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Literary Theories & Schools of Criticism

Formalism (1930s-present)

- Formalists treat each work as its own distinct piece, free from its environment, era, and even author.
- Formalism is a reaction to "...forms of 'extrinsic' criticism that viewed the text as either the product of social and historical forces or a document making an ethical statement"
- Formalists assume that the keys to understanding a text exist within "the text itself," and thus focus a great deal on, you guessed it, form (Tyson 118).
- All of the following, which all fall (more or less) under the large umbrella of formalism. We will specifically analyze:
 - Style (including diction, imagery, details, language, and sentence structure/syntax, etc.)
 - Structure,
 - Symbolism
 - Theme
 - The elements of literature
 - a. Plot, character, setting, etc.

Formalism
Form follows function

Typical questions:

- How does the author's use of diction, imagery, details, language, syntax, and sentence structure contribute to the meaning of the work?
- How are the various parts of the work interconnected? (For example, do they all contribute to a theme or other statement?)
- What is the quality of the work's organic unity "...the working together of all the parts to make an inseparable whole..." (Tyson 121)? In other words, does **how** the work is put together/ structured reflect what it is?
- How does the work use imagery to develop its own symbols? (i.e. making a certain road stand for death by constant association)
- How do paradox, irony, ambiguity, and tension work in the text?
- How do these parts and their collective whole contribute to or not contribute to the aesthetic quality of the work?
- How does the author resolve apparent contradictions within the work?
- What does the form of the work say about its content?
- Is there a central or focal passage that can be said to sum up the entirety of the work?
- How do the rhythms and/or rhyme schemes of a poem contribute to the meaning or effect of the piece?

Literary Theories & Schools of Criticism

Psychoanalytic Criticism (1930s-present)

1. Freudian: Using the theories of Sigmund Freud
 - a. The Unconscious, the Desires, and the Defenses
 - b. Freud 1880's: people's behavior is affected by their unconscious: "... human beings are motivated, even driven, by desires, fears, needs, and conflicts of which they are unaware..." (Tyson 14-15)
 - c. The unconscious is influenced by childhood events
 1. The developmental stages
 2. Relationships with parents
 3. Drives of desire and pleasure form where children focus (oral, etc.)
 4. Fear of loss (loss of physical ability, loss of affection from parents, loss of life, etc.)
 - b. Repression: "...the expunging from consciousness of these unhappy psychological events" (Tyson 15).
 - a. "...repression doesn't eliminate our painful experiences and emotions...we unconsciously behave in ways that will allow us to 'play out'...our conflicted feelings about the painful experiences and emotions we repress" (15)
 - b. To keep all of this conflict buried in our unconscious, Freud argued that we develop defenses: selective perception, selective memory, denial, displacement, projection, regression, fear of intimacy, and fear of death, among others
 - c. The Unconsciousness is composed of the id, ego, and superego
 - a. id - "...the location of the drives" or libido; seeks pleasure, avoids pain
 - b. ego - "...one of the major defenses against the power of the drives..." and home of the defenses listed above; balances id and super-ego
 - c. superego - the area of the unconscious that houses judgment (of self and others) and "...which begins to form during childhood as a result of the Oedipus complex" (Richter 1015-1016); strives for perfection
 - d. Oedipus Complex
 - a. involves children's need for their parents and the conflict that arises as children mature and realize they are not the absolute focus of their mother's attention; both boys and girls wish to possess their mothers, but as they grow older "...they begin to sense that their claim to exclusive attention is thwarted by the mother's attention to the father..." (1016).
 - b. Children, Freud maintained, connect this conflict of attention to the intimate relations between mother and father, relations from which the children are excluded. Freud believed that "the result is a murderous rage against the father...and a desire to possess the mother" (1016).
 - e. Freud and Literature
 - a. Read psychoanalytically "to see which concepts are operating in the text in such a way as to enrich our understanding"

Psychoanalytic Criticism

It's all in the mind

Freudian: *Tell me about your childhood....*

Typical questions:

- How can characters' behavior, narrative events, and/or images be explained in terms of psychoanalytic concepts of any kind (for example...fear or fascination with death, sexuality - which includes love and romance as well as sexual behavior - as a primary indicator of psychological identity or the operations of ego-id-superego)?
- How do the operations of repression structure or inform the work?
- Are there prominent words in the piece that could have different or hidden meanings? Could there be a subconscious reason for the author using these "problem words"?
- Are there any oedipal dynamics - or any other family dynamics - at work here?
- What does the work suggest about the psychological being of its author?
- What might a given interpretation of a literary work suggest about the psychological motives of the reader?

Literary Theories & Schools of Criticism

1. Jungian: Using the theories of Carl Jung (a student of Freud)

a. Components of psyche include:

- i. Self—the regulating center of the psyche; what makes us individuals
- ii. Ego—as in Freud's theory, the decision making component of the self
- iii. Shadow—the opposite of the ego, often contains qualities the ego denies, but possesses (can cause projection, transference, and neuroses)
- iv. Animus/anima— the masculine image in a woman's psyche/ the feminine image in man's psyche (develops through stages from generally negative to accepting as equals)
- v. Persona (mask)—how one presents self to the world; not necessarily deceptive

b. Collective unconscious: "...racial memory, through which the spirit of the whole human species manifests itself" (Richter 504). The collective unconsciousness is like the DNA of the human mind; all human beings share it and it shapes who we are and how we tell stories as a species.

c. Connection between literature and the expression of the collective unconscious

- i. Assumes that all stories and symbols are based on archetypes (mythic models from mankind's past)
- ii. All stories seek *syzygy*¹: the unification (through confrontation and defeat or acceptance) of the parts of the psyche; all people are in search of unified self
- iii. "Jungian criticism is generally involved with a search for the embodiment of these symbols within particular works of art" (Richter 505).

Psychoanalytic Criticism

It's all in the mind

Jungian: How does it connect to the on-going myths of the human story?

Typical questions:

- What connections can we make between elements of the text and the archetypes? (Mask, Shadow, Anima, Animus)
- How does the protagonist reflect the hero of myth?
- Does the "hero" embark on a journey in either a physical or spiritual sense?
- How does the text mirror the archetypal narrative patterns? (Quest, Night-Sea-Journey)
- Is there a journey to an underworld or land of the dead?
- How do the characters in the text mirror the archetypal figures? (Wise Old Man, Creature of Nightmare, Great Mother or nurturing Mother, Whore, destroying Crone, Lover, Destroying Angel, etc.)
- How symbolic is the imagery in the work?
- What trials or ordeals does the protagonist face? What is the reward for overcoming them?

¹ Syzygy is an astronomical term that describes three or more celestial objects lining up (the sun, moon, and Earth in an eclipse, for example).

Literary Theories & Schools of Criticism

Marxist Criticism (1930s-present)

1. Based on the theories of Karl Marx (who was influenced by philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel)
2. Concerned with class differences, economic and otherwise, & the implications & complications of the capitalism
 - a. Ultimate Question: Whom does it [the work, the effort, the policy, the road, etc.] benefit? The elite? The middle class?
 1. "Marxism attempts to reveal the ways in which our socioeconomic system is the ultimate source of our experience" (Tyson 277).
 2. Also interested in how the lower classes are oppressed - in everyday life as well as in literature.
3. The Material Dialectic
 - a. Belief system that maintains that what causes historical change is "the material realities of the economic base of society, rather than the ideological superstructure of politics, law, philosophy, religion, and art that is built upon that economic base" (Richter 1088).
 - b. Marx asserts that "...stable societies develop sites of resistance: contradictions build into the social system that ultimately lead to social revolution and the development of a new society upon the old" (1088).
 - c. This cycle of contradiction, tension, and revolution must continue: there will always be conflict between the upper, middle, and lower (working) classes and this conflict will be reflected in literature and other forms of expression - art, music, movies, etc.
4. The Revolution
 - a. Continuing conflict between the classes leads to upheaval and revolution by oppressed peoples, forming the groundwork for a new order of society and economics (where capitalism is abolished).
 - b. According to Marx, the revolution will be led by the working class under the guidance of intellectuals.
 - c. Once the elite and middle class are overthrown, the intellectuals will compose an equal society where everyone owns everything (socialism - not to be confused with Soviet or Maoist Communism).

Marxist Criticism
Whom does it benefit?

Typical questions:

(Several variations of Marxist criticism exists, most critics generally work in areas covered by the following questions.)

- Whom does it benefit if the work or effort is accepted/successful/believed, etc.?
- What is the social class of the author?
- Which class does the work claim to represent?
- What values does it reinforce?
- What values does it subvert?
- What conflict can be seen between the values the work champions and those it portrays?
- What social classes do the characters represent?
- How do characters from different classes interact or conflict?

Reader-Response Criticism (1960s-present)

1. Readers' reactions to literature as vital to interpreting the meaning of the text
2. A number of different approaches.
 - a. Can use a psychoanalytic lens, a feminist lens, or others; regardless of approach (lens) reader response critics maintain "...that what a text is cannot be separated from what it does" (Tyson 154)
3. Tyson explains that "...reader-response theorists share two beliefs:
 - a. The role of the reader cannot be omitted from our understanding of literature and
 - b. Readers do not passively consume the meaning presented to them by an objective literary text; rather they actively make the meaning they find in literature" (154).
4. In this way, reader-response sometimes discusses "the death of the author," or displacement as authoritarian figure in the text.

Reader-Response Criticism
What do you think?

Typical questions:

- How does the interaction of text and reader create meaning?
- What does a phrase-by-phrase analysis of a short literary text, or a key portion of a longer text, tell us about the reading experience pre-structured by (or built into) that text?
- Do the sounds/shapes of the words as they appear on the page or how they are spoken by the reader enhance or change the meaning of the word/work?
- How might we interpret a literary text to show that the reader's response is, or is analogous to, the topic of the story?
- What does the body of criticism published about a literary text suggest about the critics who interpreted that text and/or about the reading experience produced by that text? (Tyson 191)

Literary Theories & Schools of Criticism

Feminist Criticism (1960s-present)

1. Examines "...the ways in which literature [and other arts] reinforce or undermine the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women" (Tyson).
2. Examines how culture is patriarchal (male dominated) and "...strives to expose the explicit and implicit misogyny in male writing about women" (Richter 1346).
 - a. Misogyny in diverse areas of our culture: "modern medicine, where drugs prescribed for both sexes often have been tested on male subjects only."
3. Concerned with less obvious forms of marginalization such as the exclusion of women writers from the traditional literary canon: "...unless the critical or historical point of view is feminist, there is a tendency to under-represent the contribution of women writers" (Tyson 82-83).
4. Common ideas in feminist theories
 - a. Patriarchy oppresses women economically, politically, socially, and psychologically; patriarchal ideology is the primary means by which they are kept so
 - b. Wherever patriarchy reigns, woman is "other": marginalized, defined only by her difference from male norms and values
 - c. All of western (Anglo-European) civilization is deeply rooted in patriarchal ideology
 1. Origins of evil lie in the actions of women: Eve, Pandora
 - d. While biology determines our sex (male or female), culture determines gender (masculine or feminine)
 - e. Ultimate goal: change the world by prompting gender equality
 - f. Gender issues play a part in every aspect of human production and experience, including the production and experience of literature, whether we are consciously aware of these issues or not (91).
5. Three waves of feminism: First Wave Feminism - late 1700s-early 1900's
 - a. Writers like Mary Wollstonecraft (*A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, 1792) highlight the inequalities between the sexes.
 - b. Activists like Susan B. Anthony and Victoria Woodhull contribute to the women's suffrage movement, which leads to National Universal Suffrage in 1920 (The Nineteenth Amendment)
6. Second Wave Feminism - early 1960s-late 1970s
 - a. Building on more equal working conditions necessary in America during WW II, movements such as the National Organization for Women (NOW), 1966, consolidate feminist political activism.
 - b. Writers established the groundwork for the dissemination of feminist theories; dove-tailed with the American Civil Rights movement
7. Third Wave Feminism - early 1990s-present
 - a. Resisting the perceived over simplified ideologies (and the white, heterosexual, middle class focus) of second wave feminism; expands on marginalized populations' experiences.
 - b. Writers like Alice Walker work to "...reconcile it [feminism] with the concerns of the black community...[and] the survival and wholeness of her people, men and women both, and for the promotion of dialog and community as well as for the valorization of women and of all the varieties of work women perform" (Tyson 97).

Feminist Criticism
S/he
History/ her-story
How are women represented?

Typical questions:

- How is the relationship between men and women portrayed?
- What are the power relationships between men and women (or characters assuming male/female roles)?
- How are male and female roles defined? What constitutes masculinity and femininity?
- How do characters embody these traits?
- Do characters take on traits from opposite genders? How so? How does this change others' reactions to them?
- What does the work reveal about the operations (economically, politically, socially, or psychologically) of patriarchy?
- What does the work imply about the possibilities of sisterhood as a mode of resisting patriarchy?
- What does the work say about women's creativity?
- What does the history of the work's reception by the public and by the critics tell us about the operation of patriarchy?
- What role the work play in terms of women's literary history and literary tradition? (Tyson)

Literary Theories & Schools of Criticism

Gender Studies (1970s-present)

- 1) Gender studies explore issues of sexuality, power, and marginalized populations (woman as other) in literature and culture.
 - a) Examine the manner in which gender and sexuality is discussed
 - b) Critics working in gender studies might even be uncomfortable with the binary established by many feminist scholars between masculine and feminine:
 - i) Critics examine "a series of binary oppositions (active/passive, sun/moon...father/mother, logos/pathos). Each pair can be analyzed as a hierarchy in which the former term represents the positive and masculine and the latter the negative and feminine principle" (Richter 1433-1434).
 - a. In-Betweens
 - i. Some examining gender are interested in the breakdown of binaries such as male and female, the in-betweens.
 - ii. Maintains that cultural definitions of sexuality and what it means to be male and female are in flux: "...the distinction between "masculine" and "feminine" activities and behavior is constantly changing, so that women who wear baseball caps...can be perceived as more piquantly sexy by some heterosexual men than those women who wear white frocks and gloves and look down demurely" (Richter 1437).
 1. Moreover, Richter reminds us that as we learn more about our genetic structure, the biology of male/female becomes increasingly complex and murky

Gender Criticism

*Is gender different from sex?
What are the roles of male and female.*

Typical questions:

- What elements of the text can be perceived as being masculine (active, powerful) and feminine (passive, marginalized) and how do the characters support these traditional roles?
- What sort of support (if any) is given to elements or characters who question the masculine/feminine binary? What happens to those elements/characters?
- What elements in the text exist in the middle, between the perceived masculine/feminine binary?
- In what manner does the author present the text? Is it a traditional narrative? Is it secure and forceful? Or is it more hesitant or even collaborative?