

Definitions:

Name: _____

- **Literary Criticism:**
a natural human response to literature; nothing more than discourse-spoken or written about literature.
“almost every literary work is attended by a host of outside of outside circumstances which, once we explore and expose them, suffuse it with additional meaning.
- **Literary Theory:**
Criticism that tries to formulate general principles rather than discuss specific texts
- **Critical Approaches to Literature:**
 - Theoretical approaches or theories for understanding and interpreting literature.
 - Various critical approaches ask fundamental questions:
 - What is literature?
 - What does it do?
 - Is its concern primarily to tell stories, to divert attention, to enter entertain, to communicate ideas, to persuade, and to teach, or is it to describe and interpret reality, or to explore and explain emotions—or is it all of these?
 - To what degree is literature an art as opposed to a medium for imparting knowledge? How does it get its ideas across?
 - What can it contribute to intellectual, artistic, political and social thought and history?
 - Approaches explained are not necessarily mutually exclusive; many critics mix methods/approaches to suit interests and meaning.

Purpose for Knowing Critical Approaches of Literary Criticism:

- Provide a better understanding in order to understand and interpret literature while reading.
- Provide a format for writing to and explaining literature, especially on the AP test.

8 Critical Approaches to Literature:

1. **Formalist Criticism** - The critic pays special attention to the formal features o the text – the style, structure, imagery, tone, and genre. These critics believe that what gives a literary text its special status as art is how all of its elements work together to create the reader’s total experience.
 - Close reading – a careful step-by-step analysis and explication of a text
 - Insists that form and content cannot be meaningfully separated.
 - Focuses on the text itself to explain how it produces a complex effect on the reader.
 - Assumes the autonomy of the work itself and the relatively unimportance of extra-literary consideration such as author’s bio, political influences, etc.

Cite: Kennedy & Gioia. Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, and Drama. “Handbook on Critical Approaches to Literature. Orlando: FL. AP Literature and Composition Workshop. FL. 2012

2. **Biographical Criticism** – understanding an author’s life can help readers more thoroughly comprehend the work; biographical information provides the practical assistance of underscoring subtle but important meanings.
 - Uses the insight provided by knowledge of the author’s life
 - Reader, however must use biographical interpretations cautiously.
 - Life story can overwhelm and eventually distort work. A savvy biographical critic always remembers to base an interpretation on what is in the text itself
 - Biographical data should amplify meaning to the text, not drown it out with irrelevant material.

3. **Historical Criticism** – seeks to understand a literary work by investigating the social, cultural, and intellectual context that produced it
 - Sees a literary work chiefly as a reflection of the author’s life and times or the life and times of the characters in the work
 - Re-creates, as nearly as possible, the exact meaning and impact it had on its original audience.
 - Begins by exploring the possible ways the meaning of the text has changed over time.

4. **Psychological Criticism** – human behavior by exploring ... wish fulfillment, sexuality, the unconscious, and repression
 - Freud admitted that he himself learned a great deal about psychology from studying literature: Sophocles, Shakespeare, Goethe, and Dostoevsky.
 - Some of Freud’s most influential writing was, in a broad sense, literary criticism.
 - Psychological interpretation can afford many profound clues toward solving a work’s thematic and symbolic mysteries, but it cannot account for the beautiful symmetry of anything well-written
 - Critics use psychological approach somewhat like information about patients in therapy by considering:
 - The obvious and hidden motives that cause a character’s behavior and speech
 - Particular life experiences which can explain characteristic subjects or preoccupations
 - Background material revealed about a character such as repressed childhood trauma, adolescent memories
 - Purpose of revealing information with regard to the character’s psychological condition

5. **Moral/Intellectual Criticism** – concerned with content, ideas, and values. As old as literature itself as a mode of inculcating thought, morality, philosophy, and religion.
 - Discovers meaning and determines whether works of literature are both true and significant.
 - Determines whether a work conveys a lesson or a message and whether it can help readers lead better lives and improve understanding of the world.

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- Does not imply that literature is primarily a medium of moral and intellectual exhortation and should differ from sermonizing – not treating literature like a sermon or a political speech.
6. **Mythological Criticism** – combines the insights of anthropology, psychology, history, and comparative literature
- Explores the artist’s common humanity by tracing how the individual imagination uses myths and symbols common to different cultures and epochs
 - Archetype – a symbol, character, situation, or image that evokes a deep universal response. Usually an image which recurs often enough in literature to be recognizable as an element of one’s literary experience as a whole
 - Jung believed that all individuals share a “collective unconscious,” a set of primal memories common to the human race, existing below each person’s conscious mind
 - Closely related to Psychological Criticism because both are concerned with motives underlying human behavior.
7. **Sociological Criticism** – examines literature in the cultural, economic, and political context. (Might include **Cultural Criticism**, which identifies both the overt and covert values reflected in a cultural practice.)
- “it is the work not simply of a person, but of an author fixed in time and space, answering a community ...”
 - What cultural, economic or political values a particular text implicitly or explicitly promotes
 - Illuminates political and economic dimensions of literature other approaches overlook
8. **Gender Criticism** – examines how sexual identity influences the creation and reception of literary work (aka **Feminist Criticism**).
- Feminist critics believe that culture has been so completely dominated by men that literature is full of unexamined male-produced assumptions ... by analyzing and combating patriarchal attitudes.
 - An author’s gender influences—consciously or unconsciously.
 - Images of men and women in imaginative literature reflect or reject the social forces that have historically kept the sexes from achieving total equality.
 - Beyond feminist criticism – explores the impact of different sexual orientation on literary creation.
 - A man’s movement has also emerged.

9. **Reader-Response Criticism** – attempts to describe what happens to the reader’s mind while interpreting a text.
- Reading is a creative process.
 - Believes no text provides self-controlled meaning
 - Texts do not exist independently of reader’s interpretation.
 - Text is not finished until it is read and interpreted.
 - Recognizes the plurality of readings—rejects the concept of singular correct reading
 - However, creates limits – not all interpretations are permissible.
10. **Deconstructionist Criticism** – rejects the traditional assumption that language can accurately represent reality. Believes language is an unstable medium.
- Literary texts are made up of words that have no fixed, single meaning.
 - Shows how the text can deconstruct or be broken down.
 - Focuses on how language can achieve power.
 - Supposed truths are at best provisional and at its worst contradictory.
 - Many times this critic is negative, but at its best can expose the inadequacy of so some conventional criticism.