Literary Criticism: An Overview of Approaches

**Historical / Biographical Approach**

Historical / Biographical critics see works as the reflection of an author's life and times (or of the characters' life and times). They believe it is necessary to know about the author and the political, economical, and sociological context of his times in order to truly understand his works.

**Moral / Philosophical Approach**

Moral / philosophical critics believe that the larger purpose of literature is to teach morality and to probe philosophical issues. They interpret literature based on the values it explores and encourages, as well as on its effects on the reader and the world.

**Mimetic Approach**

This can be closely related to the moral / philosophical approach, but is somewhat broader. Mimetic critics ask how well the work of literature accords with the real world. Is it accurate? Is it correct? Is it moral? Does it show how people really act? As such, mimetic criticism can include some forms of moral / philosophical criticism, psychological criticism, and feminist criticism.

**Formalism / New Criticism**

A formalistic approach to literature, once called New Criticism, involves a close reading of the text. Formalistic critics believe that all information necessary to the interpretation of a work must be found within the work itself; there is no need to bring in outside information about the history, politics, or society of the time, or about the author's life. Because they are interested in what the work itself has to say, formalistic critics (presumably) do not view works through the lens of feminism, psychology, mythology, or some other such standpoint, and they are not interested in the work's effect on the reader. Formalistic critics love close analysis of irony, paradox, imagery, and metaphor. They are also interested in the work's setting, characters, symbols, and point of view.

**Mythological / Archetypal / Symbolic Approaches**

*Note:* "Symbolic" approaches may also fall under the category of formalism because they involve a close reading of the text. Myth criticism generally has broader, more universal applications than symbolic criticism, although both assume that certain images have a fairly universal affect on readers.

A mythological / archetypal approach to literature assumes that there is a collection of symbols, images, characters, and motifs (i.e. archetypes) that evokes basically the same response in all people. According to the psychologist Carl Jung, mankind possesses a "collective unconscious" that contains these archetypes and that is common to all of humanity. Myth critics identify these archetypal patterns and discuss how they function in the works. They believe that these archetypes are the source of much of literature's power.

**Marxist Approach**

Marxist criticism is a type of criticism in which literary works are viewed as the product of work and whose practitioners emphasize the role of class and ideology as they reflect, propagate, and even challenge the prevailing social order. Rather than viewing texts as repositories for hidden meanings, Marxist critics view texts as material products to be understood in broadly historical terms. In short, literary works are viewed as a product of work (and hence of the realm of production and consumption we call economics).
Psychological Approach

Psychological critics view works through the lens of psychology. They look either at the psychological motivations of the characters or of the authors themselves. Most frequently, psychological critics apply Freudian psychology to works, but other approaches (such as a Jungian approach) also exist.

A Freudian approach often includes pinpointing the influences of a character's id (the unrestrained, instinctual, pleasure seeking part of the mind), superego (the part of the mind that represses the id's impulses and shoves them back into the unconscious) and the ego (the part of the mind that controls the id's impulses and releases them in a healthy manner). Freudian critics like to point out the sexual implications of symbols and imagery, since one of Freud's premises was that all human behavior is motivated by sexuality. They tend to see concave images, objects with lengths exceeding their diameters, and certain activities (e.g., dancing, riding, and flying) as associated with sexual pleasure.

Feminist Approach

Feminist criticism is concerned with the impact of gender on writing and reading. It usually begins with a critique of patriarchal culture. It is concerned with the place of female writers in the canon. Finally, it includes a search for a feminine theory or approach to texts. Feminist criticism is political and often revisionist. Feminists often argue that male fears are portrayed through female characters. They may argue that gender determines everything, or just the opposite: that all gender differences are imposed by society, and gender determines nothing.

Reader Response Approach

Reader response criticism analyzes the reader's role in the production of meaning. It lies at the opposite end of the spectrum from formalistic criticism. In reader response criticism, the text itself has no meaning until it is read by a reader. The reader creates the meaning. This criticism can take into account the strategies employed by the author to elicit a certain response from readers. It denies the possibility that works are universal (i.e. that they will always mean more or less the same thing to readers everywhere). Norman Holland argues that "each reader will impose his or her 'identity theme' on the text, to a large extent recreating that text in the reader's image." Therefore, we can understand someone's reading as a function of personal identity.

Structuralist Approach

Structuralism is a theory of humankind in which all elements of human culture, including literature, are thought to be parts of a system of signs. Structuralists view literature as a system of signs, and they seek to make the organizational rules and codes--which they believe govern the form and content of all literature--explicit. Structuralism could be defined as the project of giving literary criticism the theoretical rigor of a science of language: the attempt to rethink everything through once again in terms of linguistics.

Deconstructionist Approach

Deconstruction involves the close reading of texts in order to demonstrate that any given text has irreconcilably contradictory meanings, rather than being a unified, logical whole. As J. Hillis Miller, the preeminent American deconstructor, has explained in an essay entitled "Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure" (1976), "Deconstruction is not a dismantling of the structure of a text, but a demonstration that it has already dismantled itself. Its apparently solid ground is no rock but thin air." This approach assumes that language does not refer to any external reality. It asserts multiple, conflicting interpretations of one text. It supports its interpretations based on the political or social implications of language rather than on the author's intention.