

Critical Approaches to Literature

Deconstruction is a school of literary criticism that suggests that language is not a stable entity, and that we can never exactly say what we mean. Therefore, literature cannot give a reader any one single meaning, because the language itself is simply too ambiguous. Deconstructionists value the idea that literature cannot provide any outside meaning; texts cannot represent reality. Thus, a deconstructionist critic will deliberately emphasize the ambiguities of the language that produce a variety of meanings and possible readings of a text.

Feminist criticism tries to correct predominantly male-dominated critical perspective with a feminist consciousness. This form of criticism places literature in a social context and employs a broad range of disciplines, such as history, psychology, sociology, and linguistics, to create a perspective that considers feminist issues. Feminist theories also attempt to understand representation from a woman's point of view and analyze women's writing strategies in the context of their social conditions.

Marxist criticism is a strongly politically-oriented criticism, deriving from the theories of the social philosopher Karl Marx. Marxist critics insist that all use of language is influenced by social class and economics. It directs attention to the idea that all language makes ideological statements about things like class, economics, race, and power, and the function of literary output is to either support or criticize the political and economic structures in place. Some Marxist critics use literature to describe the competing socioeconomic interests that advance capitalistic interests such as money and power over socialist interests such as morality and justice. Because of this focus, Marxist criticism focuses on content and theme rather than form.

New criticism evolved out of the same root theoretical system as deconstructionism, called formalist criticism. It was popular between the 1940's and the 1960's, but can still be found in some mutated forms today. New criticism suggests that the text is a self-contained entity, and that everything that the reader needs to know to understand it is already in the text. New critics totally discount the importance of historical context, authorial intent, effects on the reader, and social contexts, choosing to focus instead on the layers in the text. This school of criticism works with the elements of a text only – irony, paradox, metaphor, symbol, plot, and so on – by engaging in extremely close textual analysis.

New historicism focuses on the literary text as part of a larger social and historical context, and the modern reader's interaction with that work. New historicists attempt to describe the culture of a period by reading many different types of texts and paying attention to many different dimensions of a culture, including political, social, economic, and aesthetic concerns. They regard texts as not simply a reflection of the culture that produced them but also as productive of that culture by playing an active role in the social and political conflicts of an age. New historicism acknowledges and then explores various versions of "history," sensitizing us to the fact that the history on which we choose to focus is colored by being reconstructed by our present perspective.

Psychological criticism uses psychoanalytic theories, especially those of Freud and Jacques Lacan, to understand more fully the text, the reader, and the writer. The basis of this approach is the idea of the existence of a human consciousness – those impulses, desires, and feelings about which a person is unaware but which influence emotions or behavior. Critics use psychological approaches to explore the motivations of characters and the symbolic meanings of events, while biographers speculate about a writer’s own motivations – conscious or unconscious – in a literary work.

Queer theory, or gender studies, is a relatively recent and evolving school of criticism, which questions and problematizes the issues of gender identity and sexual orientation in literary texts. Queer theory overlaps in many respects with feminist theory in its aims and goals, being at once political and practical. To many queer theorists, gender is not a fixed identity that shapes actions and thoughts, but rather a “role” that is “performed.” It also challenges the notion that there is such a thing as “normal,” because that assumes the existence of a category for “deviant.” Queer theorists study and challenge the idea that these categories exist at all, but particularly in terms of sexual activities and identities.

Reader-response criticism removes the focus from the text and places it on the reader instead, by attempting to describe what goes on in the reader’s mind during the reading of a text. Reader-response critics are not interested in a “correct” interpretation of a text or what the author intended. They are interested in the reader’s individual experience with a text. Thus, there is no single definitive reading of a text, because the reader is creating, as opposed to discovering, absolute meanings in texts. This approach is not a rationale for bizarre meanings or mistaken ones, but an exploration of the plurality of texts. This kind of strategy calls attention to how we read and what influences our readings, and what that reveals about ourselves.