

LITERARY CRITICISM

FORMALIST STRATEGIES

Some Brief Definitions

Formalist critics focus on formal elements of a work—language, structure, tone—reads literature as an independent work of art rather than as a reflection of the author's state of mind or as a representation of a moment in history. Formalists examine how the elements such as plot, etc. Work together to give a coherent shape to a work while contributing to its meaning. Matters such as biography, history, politics, economic are typically regarded as extrinsic matters and less important than what goes on within the autonomous text.

New Critics (1940s-1960s) dominated American criticism offering intense examinations of the relationship between form and meaning within a work, emphasizing the subtle complexity of how a work is arranged. They paid particular attention to intrinsic matters such as diction, irony, paradox, metaphor, and symbol, as well as larger elements, such as plot, characterization, and narrative technique. Some New Critics argue that it is not possible to determine an author's intention and that the work must stand by itself.

BIOGRAPHICAL STRATEGIES

These critics look for comparisons of events of an author's life in his/her works to find meaning in the writings. They speculate about a writer's own motivations—conscious or unconscious—in a literary work.

PSYCHOLOGICAL STRATEGIES

These critics draw from Freud's theories and other psychoanalytic theories to understand more fully the text, the writer, and the reader, they use these approaches to explore the motivations of characters and the symbolic meanings of events. Psychological approaches are also used to describe and analyze the reader's personal responses to a text. (EX: *Oedipus Complex*, *Electro Complex*)

HISTORICAL STRATEGIES

Historians sometimes use literature as a window onto the past because literature frequently provides the nuances of a historic period that cannot be readily perceived through other sources. (EX: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* displays a complex set of white attitudes toward blacks in mid-nineteenth-century America that is absent in historic documents.)

Literary historians shift the emphasis from the period to the work.

Marxist critics focus on the ideological content of a work—its explicit and implicit assumptions and values about matters such as culture, race, class, and power. Some use literature to describe the competing socioeconomic interests that too often advance capitalist money and power rather than socialist morality and justice. (EX: A Marxist critic would more likely be concerned with the exploitive economic forces that cause Willy Loman to feel trapped in Miller's *Death of a Salesman* than with the playwright's use of nonrealistic dramatic techniques to reveal Loman's sinner thoughts. A Marxist reading of Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" might draw on the evidence in the story to explain that some of Mrs. Mallard's "repression" was generated by the socioeconomic structure contemporary to her.)

Cultural critics focus on the historical contexts of a literary work but pay particular attention to popular manifestations of social, political, and economic contexts. ("Popular culture")

GENDER STRATEGIES

Gender critics explore how ideas about men and women—what is masculine and feminine—can be regarded as socially constructed by particular cultures. Gender criticism expands categories and definitions of what is masculine or feminine and tends to regard sexuality as more complex than merely masculine or feminine, heterosexual or homosexual.

Feminist critics frequently look for how images of women in literature reflect the patriarchal social forces that have impeded women's efforts to achieve full equality with men.

Gay and Lesbian critics focus on a variety of issues, including how homosexuals are represented in literature, how they read literature, and whether sexuality and gender are culturally constructed or innate.

MYTHOLOGICAL STRATEGIES

Mythological critics (*archetypal critics*) interpret the hopes, fears, and expectations of entire cultures. "In this context myth is not to be understood simply as referring to stories about imaginary gods who perform astonishing feats in the causes of love, jealousy, or hatred. Nor are myths to be judged as merely erroneous, primitive accounts of how nature runs its course and humanity its affairs. Instead, literary critics use myths as a strategy for understanding how human beings try to account for their lives symbolically. Myths can be a window onto a culture's deepest perceptions about itself because myths attempt to explain what otherwise seems unexplainable: a people's origin, purpose, and destiny" (2107). These critics "look for underlying, recurrent patterns in literature that reveal universal meanings and basic human experiences for readers regardless of when or where they live." (EX: "a mythological reading of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, for example, might focus on the relationship between Oedipus's role as a scapegoat and the plague and drought that threaten to destroy Thebes. This city is saved and the fertility of its fields restored only after the corruption is located in Oedipus. His subsequent atonement symbolically provides a kind of rebirth for the city. This, the plot recapitulates ancient rites in which the well being of a king was directly linked to the welfare of his people. If a leader was sick or corrupt, he had to be replaced in order to guarantee the health of the community... A similar pattern can be seen in the rottenness that Shakespeare exposes in Hamlet's Denmark"(2109).

READER-RESPONSE STRATEGIES

This type of criticism focuses its attention on the reader rather than the work itself, describing what is going on in the reader's mind during the reading process. They believe that the literary work is an evolving creation of the reader's as he or she "processes characters, plots, images, and other elements while reading" (2110).

DECONSTRUCTIONIST STRATEGIES

Deconstructionist critics "insist that literary works do not yield fixed, single meanings. They argue that there can be no absolute knowledge about anything because language can never say what we intend it to mean. . Unlike other forms of criticism, deconstructionism seeks to destabilize meanings instead of establishing them"(2111-2112).

This summary is taken from the Sixth Edition of *The Bedford Introduction to Literature* by Michael Meyer, (St. Martin's Press: 2002).