

LITERARY CRITICISM THEORIES

- **Archetypal/Mythological Criticism** argues that archetypes determine the form and function of literary works, that a text's meaning is shaped by cultural and psychological myths. Archetypes are the unknowable basic forms personified or concretized in recurring images, symbols, or patterns which may include motifs such as the quest or the heavenly ascent, recognizable character types such as the trickster or the hero, symbols such as the apple or snake, or images such as crucifixion (as in *King Kong*, or *Bride of Frankenstein*)--all laden with meaning already when employed in a particular work. Archetypal criticism gets its impetus from psychologist Carl Jung, who postulated that humankind has a "collective unconscious," a kind of universal psyche, which is manifested in dreams and myths and which harbors themes and images that we all inherit. Literature, therefore, imitates not the world but rather the "total dream of humankind." Archetypal images and story patterns encourage readers to participate ritualistically in basic beliefs, fears, and anxieties of their age. These archetypal features not only constitute the intelligibility of the text but also tap into a level of desires and anxieties of humankind.

- **Biographical Criticism** "begins with the simple but central insight that literature is written by actual people and that understanding an author's life can help readers more thoroughly comprehend the work." Hence, it often affords a practical method by which readers can better understand a text. However, a biographical critic must be careful not to take the biographical facts of a writer's life too far in criticizing the works of that writer: the biographical critic "focuses on explicating the literary work by using the insight provided by knowledge of the author's life.... [B]iographical data should amplify the meaning of the text, not drown it out with irrelevant material."

- **Feminist/Gender Criticism** "examines how sexual identity influences the creation and reception of literary works." Originally an offshoot of feminist movements, gender criticism today includes a number of approaches, including the so-called "masculinist" approach recently advocated by poet Robert Bly. The bulk of gender criticism, however, is feminist and takes as a central precept that the patriarchal attitudes that have dominated western thought have resulted, consciously or unconsciously, in literature "full of unexamined 'male-produced' assumptions." Feminist criticism attempts to correct this imbalance by analyzing and combatting such attitudes—by questioning, for example, why none of the characters in Shakespeare's play *Othello* ever challenge the right of a husband to murder a wife accused of adultery. Other goals of feminist critics include "analyzing how sexual identity influences the reader of a text" and "examin[ing] how the images of men and women in imaginative literature reflect or reject the social forces that have historically kept the sexes from achieving total equality."

- **Formalist Criticism** regards literature as "a unique form of human knowledge that needs to be examined on its own terms." All the elements necessary for understanding the work are contained within the work itself. Of particular interest to the formalist critic are the elements of form—style, structure, tone, imagery, etc.—that are found within the text. A primary goal for formalist critics is to determine how such elements work together with the text's content to shape its effects upon readers. Sometimes, this is called New Criticism.

- **Historical Criticism** "seeks to understand a literary work by investigating the social, cultural, and intellectual context that produced it—a context that necessarily includes the artist's biography and milieu." A key goal for historical critics is to understand the effect of a literary work upon its original readers.

- **Marxist/Sociological Criticism** "examines literature in the cultural, economic and political context in which it is written or received," exploring the relationships between the artist and society. Sometimes it examines the artist's society to better understand the author's literary works; other times, it may examine the representation of such societal elements within the literature itself. One influential type of sociological criticism is Marxist criticism, which focuses on the economic and political elements of art, often emphasizing the ideological content of literature; because Marxist criticism often argues that all art is political, either challenging or endorsing (by silence) the status quo, it is frequently evaluative and judgmental, a tendency that "can lead to reductive judgment, as when Soviet critics rated Jack London better than William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, Edith Wharton, and Henry James, because he illustrated the principles of class struggle more clearly." Nonetheless, Marxist criticism "can illuminate political and economic dimensions of literature other approaches overlook."

- **Post-Colonial Criticism** is similar to cultural studies, but it assumes a unique perspective on literature and politics that warrants a separate discussion. Specifically, post-colonial critics are concerned with literature produced by colonial powers and works produced by those who were/are colonized. Post-colonial theory looks at issues of power, economics, politics, religion, and culture and how these elements work in relation to colonial hegemony (western colonizers controlling the colonized). Post-colonial criticism also questions the role of the western literary canon and western history as dominant forms of knowledge making. The terms "first-world," "second world," "third world" and "fourth world" nations are critiqued by post-colonial critics because they reinforce the dominant positions of western cultures populating first world status. This critique includes the literary canon and histories written from the perspective of first-world cultures. So, for example, a post-colonial critic might question the works included in "the canon" because the canon does not contain works by authors outside western culture.

- **Post Structuralism Criticism** concerns itself with the ways and places where systems, frameworks, definitions, and certainties break down. Post-structuralism maintains that frameworks and systems, for example the structuralist systems explained in the Structuralist area, are merely fictitious constructs and that they cannot be trusted to develop meaning or to give order. In fact, the very act of seeking order or a singular Truth (with a capital T) is absurd because there exists no unified truth. Post-structuralism holds that there are many truths, that frameworks must bleed, and that structures must become unstable or decentered. Moreover, post-structuralism is also concerned with the power structures or hegemonies and power and how these elements contribute to and/or maintain structures to enforce hierarchy. Therefore, post-structural theory carries implications far beyond literary criticism.

- **Psychological Criticism** reflects the effect that modern psychology has had upon both literature and literary criticism. Fundamental figures in psychological criticism include Sigmund Freud, whose "psychoanalytic theories changed our notions of human behavior by exploring new or controversial areas like wish-fulfillment, sexuality, the unconscious, and repression" as well as expanding our understanding of how "language and symbols operate by demonstrating their ability to reflect unconscious fears or desires"; and Carl Jung, whose theories about the unconscious are also a key foundation of Mythological Criticism. Psychological criticism has a number of approaches, but in general, it usually employs one (or more) of three approaches: An investigation of "the creative process of the artist: what is the nature of literary genius and how does it relate to normal mental functions?" The psychological study of a particular artist, usually noting how an author's biographical circumstances affect or influence their motivations and/or behavior. The analysis of fictional characters using the language and methods of psychology.

- **Reader-Response Criticism** takes as a fundamental tenet that "literature" exists not as an artifact upon a printed page but as a transaction between the physical text and the mind of a reader. It attempts "to describe what happens in the reader's mind while interpreting a text" and reflects that reading, like writing, is a creative process. According to reader-response critics, literary texts do not "contain" a meaning; meanings derive only from the act of individual readings. Hence, two different readers may derive completely different interpretations of the same literary text; likewise, a reader who re-reads a work years later may find the work shockingly different. Reader-response criticism, then, emphasizes how "religious, cultural, and social values affect readings; it also overlaps with gender criticism in exploring how men and women read the same text with different assumptions." Though this approach rejects the notion that a single "correct" reading exists for a literary work, it does not consider all readings permissible: "Each text creates limits to its possible interpretations."

- **Structuralism Criticism** looks for underlying elements in culture and literature that can be connected so that critics can develop general conclusions about the individual works and the systems from which they emerge. In fact, structuralism maintains that "...practically everything we do that is specifically human is expressed in language" (Richter 809). Structuralists believe that these language symbols extend far beyond written or oral communication. For example, codes that represent all sorts of things permeate everything we do: "the performance of music requires complex notation...our economic life rests upon the exchange of labor and goods for symbols, such as cash, checks, stock, and certificates...social life depends on the meaningful gestures and signals of 'body language' and revolves around the exchange of small, symbolic favors: drinks, parties, dinners" (Richter 809).