

Literary Critical Theory: Interpretive Strategies

Historicism considers the literary work in light of "what really happened" during the period reflected in that work. It insists that to understand a piece, we need to understand the author's biography and social background, ideas circulating at the time, and the cultural milieu. Historicism also "finds significance in the ways a particular work resembles or differs from other works of its period and/or genre," and therefore may involve source studies. It may also include examination of philology and linguistics. It is typically a discipline involving impressively extensive research.

New Criticism examines the relationships between a text's ideas and its form, "the connection between what a text says and the way it's said." New Critics/Formalists "may find tension, irony, or paradox in this relation, but they usually resolve it into unity and coherence of meaning." New Critics look for patterns of sound, imagery, narrative structure, point of view, and other techniques discernible on close reading of "the work itself." They insist that the meaning of a text should not be confused with the author's intentions nor the text's affective dimension--its effects on the reader. The objective determination as to "how a piece works" can be found through close focus and analysis, rather than through extraneous and erudite special knowledge.

Archetypal criticism "traces cultural and psychological 'myths' that shape the meaning of texts." It argues that "certain literary archetypes determine the structure and function of individual literary works," and therefore that literature imitates not the world but rather the "total dream of humankind." Archetypes (recurring images or symbols, patterns, universal experiences) may include motifs such as the quest or the heavenly ascent, symbols such as the apple or snake, or images such as crucifixion--all laden with meaning already when employed in a particular work.

Psychoanalytic criticism adopts the methods of "reading" employed by Freud and later theorists to interpret what a text really indicates. It argues that "unresolved and sometimes unconscious ambivalences in the author's own life may lead to a disunified literary work," and that the literary work is a manifestation of the author's own neuroses. Psychoanalytic critics focus on apparent dilemmas and conflicts in a work and "attempt to read an author's own family life and traumas into the actions of their characters," realizing that the psychological material will be expressed indirectly, encoded (similar to dreams) through principles such as "condensation," "displacement," and "symbolism."

Feminist criticism critiques patriarchal language and literature by exposing how a work reflects masculine ideology. It examines gender politics in works and traces the subtle construction of masculinity and femininity, and their relative status, positionings, and marginalizations within works.

Marxist criticism argues that literature reflects social institutions and that it is one itself, with a particular ideological function: that literature participates in the series of struggles between oppressed and oppressing classes which makes up human history. Similar to Marx's historical theory, Marxist criticism will focus on the distribution of resources, materialism, class conflict, or the author's analysis of class relations. It examines how some works attempt to shore up an oppressive social order or how they idealize social conflict out of existence, how others offer an alternative collective life or propose a utopian vision as a solution.

Cultural criticism questions traditional value hierarchies and takes a cross-disciplinary approach to works traditionally marginalized by the aesthetic ideology of white European males. Instead of more attention to the canon, cultural studies examines works by minority ethnic groups and postcolonial writers, and the products

of folk, urban, and mass culture. Popular literature, soap opera, rock and rap music, cartoons, professional wrestling, food, etc. -- all fall within the domain of cultural criticism. We are focusing on it particularly as it concerns questioning the ways Western cultural tradition expressed in literature defines itself partly by stifling the voices of oppressed groups or even by demonizing those groups. We will focus on how literary tradition has constructed models of identity for oppressed groups, how these groups have constructed oppositional literary identities, and how different communities of readers might interpret the same text differently due to varied value systems.

New Historicism "finds meaning by looking at a text within the framework of the prevailing ideas and assumptions of its historical era, or by considering its contents within a context of 'what really happened' during the period that produced the text." New Historicists concern themselves with the political function of literature and with the concept of power, "the complex means by which societies produce and reproduce themselves." These critics focus on revealing the historically specific model of truth and authority reflected in a given work.

Reader-Response criticism "insists that all literature is a structure of experience, not just a form or meaning," and therefore focuses on finding meaning in the act of reading itself and examines the ways individual readers or communities of readers experience texts. These critics examine how the reader joins with the author "to help the text mean." They determine what kind of reader or what community of readers the work implies and helps to create. They examine "the significance of the series of interpretations the reader goes through in the process of reading."

Deconstruction is a recent school of criticism which ventures beyond the structuralists' assertion that all aspects of human culture are fundamentally languages--complex systems of signs: signifieds (concepts) and signifiers (verbal or non-verbal--and that therefore a quasi-scientific formalism is available for approaching literature (and advertising, fashion, food, etc.). Deconstructionists oppose the "metaphysics of presence," that is, the claim of literature or philosophy that we can find some full, rich meaning outside of or prior to language itself. Like formalists, these critics also look "at the relation of a text's ideas to the way the ideas are expressed. Unlike formalists, though, deconstructionists find meaning in the ways the text breaks down: for instance, in the ways the rhetoric contradicts the ostensible message." Deconstructive criticism "typically argues that a particular literary, historical, or philosophical work both claims to possess full and immediate presence and admits the impossibility of attaining such presence,"--that texts, rather than revealing the New Critic's "unities," actually dismantle themselves due to their intertwined, inevitably opposite "discourses" (strands of narrative, threads of meaning).

[Quotations from Arthur W. Biddle and Toby Fulwiler, *Reading, Writing, and the Study of Literature* (NY: Random House, 1989): 75-84, 100.]

Critical Theory
Introduction to Literature