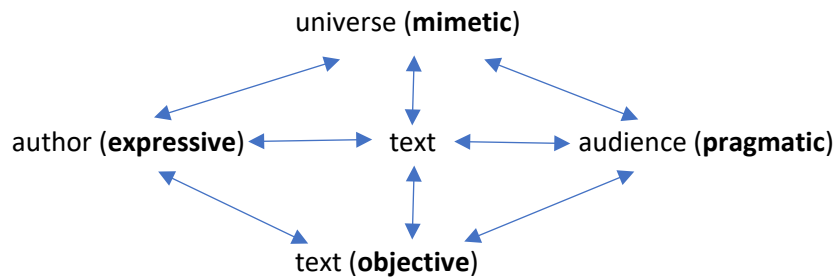


## APPROACHES TO LITERATURE



**MIMETIC:** The first **theoretical coordinate**<sup>1</sup> is the **mimetic concern**. **How does the poem (or work) relate to a model of external reality?** Terms that fit within this approach are **imitation, representation, mimesis, and mirror**. Pay attention to **metaphors** – the term “mirror” is the subject of Meyer **Abrams'** *The Mirror and the Lamp*. See also Hamlet's speech about art – art “holds the mirror up to nature”. Painting is another common mimetic term. Realism is also a mimetic theory, but it sometimes insists that **art conveys universal truths**, as opposed to merely temporal and particular truth. **Plato**, by contrast, says that poetry fails on mimetic terms – it has no access to the world of forms.

**PRAGMATIC:** This second coordinate deals with **the relationship between text and audience**. The concern for the **moral effects of art** is often drawn from mimetic theory. **Plato** invokes the flawed mimetic capacity of poetry as the source of its **moral contagiousness**. “Psychological” critics like Wordsworth and **Aristotle** are pragmatists; they lay great stress on art's supposed **therapeutic value**. **Freud** does the same.

Aside from moral and psychological pragmatism, there is **ideological or political pragmatism**: **cultural-studies-oriented critics** focus on **gender, race, and class** issues. They inquire into the extent to which works support or undermine particular ideologies. This is moral criticism with a political bent. One might ask, for example, what the effects of the portrayal of African-Americans were in “Gone with the Wind”.

**EXPRESSIVE:** This third coordinate has to do with **the relationship between poet and work**. **Biographical** criticism is expressive, as is romanticism and **Freudian** analysis.

**OBJECTIVE:** The fourth coordinate emphasizes the **integrity** and ontologically sound status of the **work itself**, without immediate reference to audience, poet, or external reality. **Formalists** practice this type of criticism. See the “New Criticism” of Cleanth Brooks, John Crowe Ransom, Wimsatt and Beardsley, and others.

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<sup>1</sup> The four coordinates of literary theory have been taken over from M. H. Abrams's *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (1953) and Hazard Adams's *Critical Theory since Plato* (1971). The first page of this handout draws on the following material by Alfred J. Drake and teaching materials of Clare Wallace and Ondřej Pilný: [http://www.ajdrake.com/e212\\_spr\\_03/materials/guides/crit\\_4\\_coords.htm](http://www.ajdrake.com/e212_spr_03/materials/guides/crit_4_coords.htm).

### Critical Approaches to Literature: A Brief Overview

(See <http://www.cla.purdue.edu/blackmon/engl360k/critical.html>)

- Anthropological
- Archetypal
- Biographical
- Narratological
- New Criticism
- (New) Historicism
- Post-Structuralism
- Psychoanalytic
- Reader-Response
- Semiotics
- Social
- Structuralism

NB: It helps if you keep referring to the diagram (based on Abrams) at the top of the handout as you read about the particular critical approaches listed below in order to see to what extent the individual agents in a textual situation as well as the basic coordinates of literary theory are interconnected.

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**Anthropological:** Tends to focus on aspects of everyday **life in various cultures** (i.e. folklore, ritual, celebrations, traditions).

You might ask: What is the everyday social function of this text? How has it been transmitted (orally/written)? Does it reflect folk culture?

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**Archetypal:** Relates to Psychoanalytical Criticism in some ways (see below). Developed by Carl Jung, this approach accepts the idea of the unconscious mind. However, unlike Sigmund Freud and other critics, Jungians argue that part of the unconscious is shared by all people. From this perspective the term “**collective unconscious**” developed, a term representing the memories of human products and activities (found in myths, symbols, rituals, literatures) and reproduced as archetypes.

Archetypes are figures or patterns recurring in works of the imagination. They can be divided into three categories.

- **Archetypal characters** include (but are not limited to): the hero, the villain, the outcast, the femme fatale, and the star-crossed lovers.
- **Archetypal situations** include (but are not limited to): the quest, the journey, death and rebirth, and the task.
- **Archetypal symbols** and associations include polarities: light/dark, water/desert, height/depth, spring/winter.

It is important to note two things. First, works may contain multiple archetypes. Second, not everything is an archetype. A balance between these two extremes can be very difficult to achieve. Looking for recurring patterns within a piece or within a collection of related stories can be useful in using this approach.

For further reading: Northrop Frye's *The Educated Imagination* and *Anatomy of Criticism*.

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**Biographical:** Relates the author's life and thoughts to his/her works. As these tend to reflect the period in which he/she lived, biographical criticism may be an important aspect of the (New) Historical approach (see below). The biographical approach allows one to better understand elements within a work, as well as to relate works to **authorial intention** and **audience**.

You might ask: How does the text reflect the author's life? Is this text an extension of the author's position on issues in the author's life?

Biographical criticism has **two weaknesses** that should be avoided. First, avoid equating the work's content with the author's life (or the character with the author); they are not necessarily the same. Second, avoid less-than-credible sources of information, particularly works that tend to be highly speculative or controversial unless verified by several sources.

For further reading: *Charles Dickens: A Critical Introduction* by K. J. Fielding; *Henry James: His Life and Writings* by F. W. Dupree; and *The Far Side of Paradise: A Biography of F. Scott Fitzgerald* by Arthur Mizener.

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**Narratological:** Concerns itself with the **structure of narrative** – how events are constructed and through what point of view. You might ask, “How is the narrative of this work (fiction, poetry, film) pieced together? Who or what is narrating?” This considers the narrator not necessarily as a person, but more as a window through which one sees a constructed reality. This can range from someone telling a tale to a seemingly objective camera: “To what extent is the narrative mediated?”

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**New Criticism:** Unlike biographical and historical approaches, a New Critic approach contends that literature need have little or no connection with the author's intention, life, or social/historical situation. **Everything we need to analyze the work is contained within the text.** New Critics also tend to **examine the physical qualities of the text** as a “scientific matter” that focuses on language and literary conventions (e.g. rhyme, meter, alliteration, plot, point of view, etc.). It is similar, though not identical, to Structuralism in its emphasis on the text itself (see below).

For further reading: *The New Criticism* by John Crow Ransom.

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**(New) Historicism:** May approach a text from numerous perspectives, but all these tend to reflect a **concern with the period in which a text is produced and/or read** (including contemporary work). **No “history” can be truly objective** or comprehensive because history is constantly written and rewritten; however, studying the historical context of a work, particularly in contrast with that in which it is experienced, can make us aware of our biases and hopefully enable us to understand the text (and the culture, context, ourselves) better.

New Historicism is concerned with **relating the idea of a text to other key concepts:** culture, discourse, ideology, the self, and history. New Historicists examine intersections of text, reader, and history and with a special emphasis on literature as a cultural text. New Historicists also examine the relationship of literature to the power structures of society.

**New Historical research might include** Biography (see above), reception studies, influence studies, or even a technological approach to the medium (filmmaking, printing, the music industry, computers and the WWW). It has also been utilized with Reader-Response criticism (see below).

You might ask: How does the text embody a history of its time? Is this text a useful historical document?

For further reading: *Columbia Literary History of the United States*, edited by Emory Elliot, and *The Literary History of England*, edited by Albert C. Baugh.

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**Post-Structuralism:** While accepting Structuralism and Saussure's analysis of language (see Structuralism below), post-structuralism considers the relationship between language and meaning, ultimately rejecting any certainty of meaning. Jacques Derrida, one of the most influential post-structuralists, called his critical method “deconstruction”. Using deconstruction, the reader **analyzes**

**the text and especially its language to expose its ambiguity and upset the connection between the text and the “real world”.**

You might initially ask: How does the language/meaning in this text contradict itself? How can a work be interpreted in multiple ways?

For further reading: *From the New Criticism to Deconstruction* by Art Berman and *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* by Christopher Norris.

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**Psychoanalytic:** Such criticism aims at uncovering the working of the human mind – especially the expression of the unconscious. Possibilities include analyzing a text like a dream, looking for symbolism and repressed meaning, or developing a psychological analysis of a character.

Three ideas found in the work of Sigmund Freud are particularly useful: the dominance of the unconscious mind over the conscious, the expression of the unconscious mind through symbols (often in dreams), and sexuality as a powerful force for motivating human behavior. Psychoanalytic criticism can be applied to either the author/text relationship or to the reader/text relationship.

You might ask: How does this text use or represent the unconscious mind: of the author, the characters, the reader?

For further reading: *Literature and Psychoanalysis*, edited by Edith Kurzweil and William Phillips, and *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida and Psychoanalytic Reading*, edited by John P. Muller and William J. Richardson.

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**Reader-Response Criticism:** Studies the interaction of reader with text, holding **the text as incomplete until it is read**. This critical approach can be, and often is, combined with other approaches (such as Psychoanalytical and Historical) but **challenges the self-contained focus of New Criticism or the claim of meaninglessness embraced by Post-Structuralism**.

For further reading: *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*, edited by Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crossman, and *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* by Stanley Fish.

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**Semiotics:** Critiques the use of language, preferably in texts that comment on the nature of language (see Structuralism). To the semiotician, **language is an arbitrary but shared system of assigned meanings**.

You might ask: “**How does this text critique language?** Does it break the rules of language usage? Why? Or, if the text doesn’t seem to comment on its own language: How does the language used reflect an unawareness of **language as an ideological tool?**”

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**Social Criticism:** Concerns itself with the **social function of texts, thus consisting of several categories**, and analyzes social structure, power, politics, and agency. Social criticism is similar to historical criticism in recognizing literature as a reflection of environment. There are several social movements, but Marxism, Feminism and Gender Studies, and Green Theory/Ecocriticism are prevalent.

**Marxism** is concerned with labor practices, **class theories, and economics**, especially as concerned with the **struggles of the poor and oppressed**. A Marxist might ask, “How are classes stratified/defined in this text? Does this text reflect an economic ideology? What is the attitude toward labor furthered by this text?”

For further reading: *Marx, Engels, and the Poets: Origins of Marxist Literary Criticism* by Peter Demetz and *Marxism and Literary Criticism* by Terry Eagleton.

**Feminist Criticism** examines works by and about women.

**Gender Criticism** evolved out of feminism to address issues of masculinity/femininity as binaries, sexual orientation, heterosexism, and differences in sexes. Both are political activities concerned with fair representation and treatment of people.

A critic using Feminist Studies or Gender Studies (sometimes also known as **Queer Studies**) might ask: “**How is gender constructed or deconstructed in this text? Is the view of the text gendered or sexist?**”

For further reading: *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory*, edited by Elaine Showalter, and *The Gay and Lesbian Studies Reader*, edited by Henry Avelove, et al.

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**A Green/Eco Critic** might ask: “Of what priority is conservation in this text? **What is the relationship between humankind and Nature?**”

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**Structuralism:** Like New Criticism, Structuralism **concentrates on elements within works of literature without focusing on historical, social, and biographical influences**. Structuralism, however, is grounded in linguistics and developed by Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure's work argues that **language is a complete, self-contained system** and should be studied as such. Saussure also claimed that language is a system of signs. When applied to literature, this form of criticism is generally known as Semiotics (see above).

For further reading: *Semiotic and Structural Analyses of Fiction: An Introduction and a Survey of Applications* by Leonard Orr; *Structuralism in Literature: An Introduction* by Robert Scholes; and *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* by Umberto Eco.

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**Other useful materials (in addition to the library collection):**

Mario, Klarer, *An Introduction to Literary Studies* (London: Routledge, 1999. On Moodle.

*A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*. 3d ed. ed., Wilfred L. Guerin [et al.] New York: Oxford University Press, 1992 See <http://comminfo.rutgers.edu/~mjoseph/c-guerin.html>