

CRITICAL THEORY:

PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Psychological criticism approaches a work of literature as the revelation of its author's mind and personality. Psychological critics see literary works as intimately linked with their author's mental and emotional characteristics. Critics who employ a psychological perspective do so to explain how a literary work reflects its writer's consciousness and mental world, and they use what they know of writers' lives to explain features of their work. Some psychological critics are more interested in the creative process of writers than in their literary works; these critics look into literary works for clues to a writer's creative imagination. Other psychological critics wish to study not so much a writer's creative process as his or her motivations and behavior; these critics may study a writer's works along with letters and diaries to better understand not just what a writer has done in life but why the writer behaved in a particular manner. Still other critics employ methods of Freudian psychoanalysis to understand not only the writers themselves, but the literary characters they create.

FREUDIAN APPROACH

A Freudian approach often includes pinpointing the influences of a character's **id** (the instinctual, pleasure seeking part of the mind), **superego** (the part of the mind that represses the id's impulses) and the **ego** (the part of the mind that controls but does not

repress the id's impulses, releasing them in a healthy way). Freudian critics like to point out the sexual implications of symbols and imagery, since Freud believed that all human behavior is motivated by sexuality. They tend to see concave images, such as ponds, flowers, cups, and caves as female symbols; whereas objects that are longer than they are wide are usually seen as *phallic symbols*. Dancing, riding, and flying are associated with sexual pleasure. Water is usually associated with birth, the female principle, the maternal, the womb, and the death wish. Freudian critics occasionally discern the presence of an Oedipus complex (a boy's unconscious rivalry with his father for the love of his mother) in the male characters of certain works. Freud posited an unconscious element of the mind below consciousness, just beneath awareness. According to Freud, the unconscious harbors forbidden wishes and desires, often sexual, that are in conflict with an individual's or society's moral standards. Freud explains that although the individual represses or "censors" these unconscious fantasies and desires, they become "displaced" or distorted in dreams and other forms of fantasy, which serve to disguise their real meaning.

The disguised versions that appear in a person's conscious life are considered to be the "manifest" content of the unconscious wishes that are their "latent" content, which psychoanalytic critics attempt to discover and explain. Psychoanalytic critics rely heavily on symbolism to identify and explain the meaning of repressed desires, interpreting ordinary objects such as clocks and towers and natural elements such as fire and water in ways that reveal aspects of a literary character's sexuality. These critics also make use of other psychoanalytic concepts and terms such as "fixation" or "obsessive compulsion," attaching to feelings, behaviors, and fantasies that individuals presumably outgrow yet retain in the form of unconscious attractions.

STRENGTHS and WEAKNESSES OF THIS THEORY

Like all forms of literary criticism, psychoanalytic criticism can yield useful clues to the sometimes baffling symbols, actions, and settings in a literary work; however, like all forms of literary criticism, it has its limits. For one thing, some critics rely on psycho-criticism as a "one size fits all" approach, when other literary scholars argue that no one approach can adequately illuminate or interpret a complex work of art. The danger is that the serious student may become theory-ridden, forgetting that Freud's is not the only approach to literary criticism. To see a great work of fiction or a great poem primarily as a psychological case study is often to miss its wider significance and perhaps even the essential aesthetic experience it should provide.

HOW TO WRITE FROM A PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Like psychoanalysis itself, this critical endeavor seeks evidence of unresolved emotions, psychological conflicts, guilt, ambivalences, and so forth within what may well be a dis-unified literary work. The author's own childhood traumas, family life, sexual conflicts, fixations, and

such will be traceable within the behavior of the characters in the literary work. But psychological material will be expressed indirectly, disguised, or encoded (as in dreams) through principles such as "symbolism" (the repressed object represented in disguise), "condensation" (several thoughts or persons represented in a single image), and "displacement" (anxiety located onto another image by means of association). Despite the importance of the author here, psychoanalytic criticism is similar to New Criticism in not concerning itself with "what the author intended." But what the author *never* intended (that is, repressed) is sought. The unconscious material has been distorted by the censoring conscious mind.

Questions to Analyze "The Cask of Amontillado" from a Psychological Perspective:

- 1. What connections can you make between your knowledge of the author's life and the behavior and motivations of characters in his work?**
- 2. How does your understanding of the characters, their relationships, their actions, and their motivations in a literary work help you better understand the mental world and imaginative life, or the actions and motivations, of the author?**
- 3. How can a psychological or psychoanalytic approach to a particular work be combined with an approach from another critical perspective? Give a specific example.**

CRITICAL THEORY: FEMINIST
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

By general definition, feminism is a philosophy in which women and their contributions are valued. It is based on social, political and economic equality for women. Feminists can be anyone in the population: men, women, girls or boys. Feminism can also be described as a movement or a revolution that includes women and men who wish the world to be equal without discrimination. Feminists view the world as being unequal. They wish to see discrimination based on gender and the idea that men are superior to women abolished.

Throughout history, women have always struggled to gain equality, respect and the same rights as men. This has been difficult because of patriarchy, an ideology in which men are superior to women and have the right to rule women. This ideology is present in societies throughout the world and as a result, even in the new millennium, women are still struggling for rights that most men take for granted. The struggle is even more difficult for women of color because not only were they dealing with issues of sexism, but also racism. In order to fight patriarchy, feminism and feminist theory was born.

FOUR CENTRAL TENETS OF FEMINIST CRITICISM

1. Western civilization is pervasively patriarchal (ruled by the father) - that is, it is male-centered and controlled, and is organized and conducted in such a way as to subordinate women to men in all cultural domains; familial, religious, political, economic, social, legal, and artistic.
2. The prevailing concepts of gender - of the traits that constitute what is masculine and what is feminine - are largely, if not entirely, cultural constructs that were generated by the omnipresent patriarchal biases of our civilization.
3. This patriarchal ideology pervades those writings which have been considered great literature and which until recently have been written almost entirely by men for men.
4. The traditional aesthetic categories and criteria for analyzing and appraising literary works are in fact infused with masculine assumptions, interests, and ways of reasoning, so that the standard rankings, and also the critical treatments of literary works have in fact been tacitly but thoroughly gender based.

STRENGTHS & WEAKNESSES OF THIS THEORY

One of the strengths of the Feminist Theory is that it can be applied to a broad range of issues. It also provides a valuable critique of other theories and perspectives. Some of the limitations of the Feminist Theories are that research and practice are emotionally charged and there can sometimes be an overemphasis on gender and power.

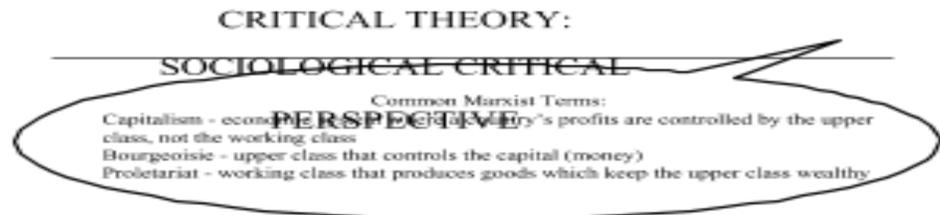
HOW TO WRITE FROM A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

Feminist criticism, like New Historicist Criticism, examines the social, economic, and cultural aspects of literary works, but especially for what those works reveal about the role, position, and influence of women. Feminist critics also typically see literature as an arena in which to contest for power and control, since as sociological critics (Feminist and Marxist perspectives are branches of Sociological Criticism), feminist critics also see literature as an agent for social transformation.

Moreover, feminist critics seek to redress the imbalance of literary study in which all important books are written by men or the only characters of real interest are male protagonists. Feminist critics have thus begun to study women writers whose works have been previously neglected. They have begun to look at the way feminist consciousness has been portrayed in literature written by both women and men. And they have begun to change the nature of the questions asked about literature that reflect predominantly male experience. In these and other ways feminist critical perspectives have begun to undermine the patriarchal assumptions that have dominated critical approaches to literature until relatively recently.

Questions to Analyze “The Yellow Wallpaper” from a Feminist Perspective:

- 1. How are the relations between men and women, or between members of the same sex, presented in the work?**
- 2. How are the male and female roles defined?**
- 3. Does the author present the work from within a predominately male or female sensibility? Why might this have been done, and with what effects?**
- 4. How do the facts of the author’s life relate to the presentation of men and women in the work? To their relative degrees of power?**



In the same way that many psychoanalytic critics base their approach to literature on the theoretical works of Sigmund Freud, *Marxist* critics are indebted to the political theory of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Marxist critics examine literature for its reflection of how dominant elites exploit subordinate groups, how people become “alienated” from each other, and how middle-class/bourgeois values lead to the control and suppression of the working classes. Marxist critics see literature’s value in promoting social and economic revolution, with works that espouse Marxist ideology serving to prompt the kinds of economic and political changes that conform to Marxist principles. Such changes would include the overthrow

of the dominant capitalist ideology and the loss of power by those with money and privilege. Marxist criticism is concerned both with understanding the role of politics, money, and power in literary works, and with redefining and reforming the way society distributes its resources among the classes. Fundamentally, the Marxist ideology looks toward a vision of a world not so much where class conflict has been minimized but one in which classes have disappeared altogether.

STRENGTHS OF THIS THEORY

Marxist theory looks at society as a whole, therefore acknowledging all the social forces involved. It recognizes the power interests of different groups and is good at explaining conflict and change in society. It stresses the role of class struggle within society between the proletariat (workers) and the bourgeoisie (owners). It recognizes that society is organized under capitalism, in that the bourgeoisie aim to maximize profit by exploiting the proletariat.

WEAKNESSES OF THIS THEORY

Marxist theory, on the other hand, finds it difficult to explain the presence of certain phenomena (for example a person who has a lot of money but is from a working class background). It overlooks the idea that other factors may help to shape society.

HOW TO WRITE FROM A MARXIST PERSPECTIVE

To begin a Marxist analysis, consider the ways in which power relations are played out in a story. Marxist critics generally approach literary works as products of their era, especially as influenced, even determined by the economic and political ideologies that prevail at the time of their composition. The literary work is considered a “product” in relation to the actual economic and social conditions that exist at either the time of the work’s composition or the time and place of the action it describes. Marxist novels focus on the relations among classes such as the rise and fall of a character’s wealth. This perspective investigates the ways political and economic forces conspire to keep some social, ethnic, and racial groups in power and others out.

Questions to Analyze “The Judgment” from a Marxist Perspective:

- 1. What social forces and institutions are represented in the work? How are these forces portrayed? What is the author’s attitude toward them?**
- 2. What political elements appear in the work? How important are they in determining or influencing the lives of the characters?**
- 3. What economic issues appear in the course of the work? How important are economic facts in influencing the motivation and behaviour of the character?**
- 4. To what extent are the lives of the characters influenced or determined by social, political, and economic forces? To what extent are the characters aware of these forces?**

CRITICAL THEORY: READER-RESPONSE PERSPECTIVE

Reader-response criticism raises the question of where literary meaning resides - in the literary text, in the reader, or in the interactive space between text and reader. Reader-response critics differ in the varying degrees of subjectivity they allow into their theories of interpretation. Some see the literary text as a kind of mirror in which readers see themselves. In making sense of literature, readers re-create themselves. Other reader-response critics focus on the text rather than on the feelings and reactions of the reader. Text-centered reader-response critics emphasize the temporal aspect of reading, suggesting that readers make sense of texts over time, moving through a text sentence by sentence, line by line, word by word, filling in gaps and making inferences. Still other reader-response critics, Norman Holland, for example, focus on the psychological dynamics of reading. Holland argues that every reader creates a specific identity theme unique to himself or herself in reading any literary work. He suggests that to make sense of a literary work readers must find in it, or create through the process of reading it, their identity themes.

One of the earliest and most influential reader-response critics, Louise Rosenblatt, argues against placing too much emphasis on the reader's imagination, identity, or feelings in literary interpretation. Rosenblatt keeps the focus on the text, though she is concerned with the dynamic relationship between reader and text, since it is in that interrelationship that Rosenblatt believes literary meanings are made. For Rosenblatt, the meaning of a literary work cannot exist until it is "performed" by the reader. Until then literary meaning is only potential. It becomes actual when readers realize its potential through their acts of reading, responding, and interpreting.

STRENGTHS and WEAKNESSES OF THIS THEORY

One benefit of using reader-response perspectives to interpret literary works is that you begin with what is primary and basic - your initial reactions, your primary responses. Of course, as you read, you may change your mind about your reaction to a work. You may experience opposite or different feelings. Or you may make sense of the work differently because of discoveries you make later in the process of reading. What you read in the last chapter of a novel, for example, may change your understanding of what you read in the first chapter or in a middle chapter, which you had interpreted one way until you reached the end. What's important for reader-response critics is just this kind of active reading dynamic, in which a reader's changing

ideas and feelings are foregrounded. These critics describe the reclusiveness of the reading process, the way in which our minds anticipate what is coming in the text based on what we have already read and, simultaneously, the way we loop back retrospectively to reconsider earlier passages in light of later ones that we read. The literary text does not disappear for reader-response critics. Instead it becomes part of readers' experience as they make their way through it.

HOW TO WRITE FROM A READER-RESPONSE PERSPECTIVE

Reader-response criticism emphasizes process rather than product, an experience rather than an object, a shifting subjectivity rather than a static and objective text and meaning. Therefore readers *make* meaning through their encounters with literary texts and the meanings they make may be as varied as the individuals who read them. Reader-response critics also emphasize that an individual reader's interpretation of a work may change, in fact probably will change, over time. For example reading Shakespeare in high school can be a very different experience from reading it in University or as an adult. Also, reader-response critics believe that readers from different generations and different centuries interpret books differently. The works say different things to readers of different historical eras because of their particular needs, concerns and historical circumstances.

The crucial thing for readers is to acknowledge their own subjectivity in the act of reading and to be aware that they come to literary works with a set of beliefs, ideas, attitudes, values - with all that makes them who and what they are. Being aware of our predispositions when we read can prevent our biases and prejudices from skewing our interpretations of literary works. At the same time, we need to pay attention to the details of the text. We cannot make words and sentences mean anything at all. There are limits and boundaries to what is acceptable, limits and boundaries that are subject to negotiation and debate. For most reader-response theorists, interpretation has both latitude and limits. Negotiating between them in a delicate balancing act allows readers to exercise their subjectivity while recognizing the significance of the words on the page.

Questions to Analyze "The Rocking Horse Winner" from a Reader-Response Perspective:

1. What is your initial emotional response to the work? How did you feel upon first reading it?
2. Did you find yourself responding to it or reacting differently at any point? If so, why? If not, why not?
3. At what places in the text did you have to make inferences, fill in gaps, make interpretive decisions? On what bases did you make these inferential guesses?
4. How do you respond to the characters, the speaker, or the narrator? How do you feel about them? Why?
5. What places in the text caused you to do the most serious thinking? How did you put the pieces, sections, parts of the work together to make sense of it?
6. If you have read a work more than once, how have your second and subsequent readings differed from earlier ones? How do you account for those differences, or for the fact that there are no differences in either your thoughts or your feelings about the work?



CRITICAL THEORY:
MYTHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

In general terms a “myth” is a story that explains how something came to be. Every culture creates stories to explain what it considers important, valuable, and true. Thus the Greek myth of Persephone, who was kidnapped by Pluto, the god of the underworld, and allowed to return to her mother Demeter every year, explains the changes of the seasons. Or the Biblical story of Eve’s temptation by the serpent in the book of Genesis, which concludes with God’s curse of the serpent, explains among other things, why snakes crawl on their bellies.

Mythological criticism, however, is not concerned with stories that explain origins so much as those that provide universal story patterns that recur with regularity among many cultures and in many different times and places. The patterns myth critics typically identify and analyze are those that represent dying, growing up and crossing the threshold into adulthood, going on a journey, engaging in sexual activity. These familiar patterns of human action and experience, however, are of interest to myth critics not primarily in and of themselves, but rather for how they represent religious beliefs, social customs, and cultural attitudes.

Birth, for example, is of interest as a symbolic beginning and death as a symbolic ending. A journey is a symbolic venturing out into the world to explore and experience what it has in store for the traveler. Sleeping and dreaming are not simply states of ordinary experience but symbolic modes of entrance into another realm and an envisioning of unusual and perhaps strange possibilities unimagined in waking life. So too with physical contests, sexual encounters, and other forms of experience, which many times are occasions for individuals to be tested, challenged, and perhaps initiated into an advanced or superior state of being – becoming a warrior, for example, a mother, a prophet, or a king.

Myth critics discover in literature of all times and places stories with basic patterns that can be explained in terms of archetypes, or universal symbols, which some mythological critics believe are part of every person's unconscious mind. Besides those embodying the fundamental facts of human existence, other archetypes include typical literary characters such as the Don Juan or womanizer, the femme fatale or dangerous female, the trickster or con artist, the damsel in distress, the rebel, the tyrant, the hero, the betrayer. Creatures real and imaginary can also be archetypal symbols. The lion, for example, can represent strength, the eagle independence, the fox cunning, the unicorn innocence, the dragon destruction, the centaur the union of matter and spirit, animalist and humanity, or even humanity and divinity.

HOW TO WRITE FROM A MYTHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Myth critics approach the study of literary works and the study of a culture's myths in many ways. It is on plot or the sequence of causally related incidents and actions that myth criticism focuses most heavily. The archetypal images, creatures and characters exist within stories that themselves exhibit patterns of recurrence. The Canadian critic Northrop Frye, for example, explains the traditional literary genres, including the novel, the drama, and epic, with reference to the recurrence in them of mythic patterns such as death and rebirth, departure and return, ignorance and insight. Frye associates the genres of comedy, romance, tragedy, and irony or satire with the cycle of the season, each generation represents the natural events associated with a particular seasons (comedy with the fertility of spring, tragedy with the decline of the year in autumn). What a mythological critic does with archetypal character, stories, creatures and even natural elements such as sun and moon, darkness and light, fire and water, is to link them up with one another, to see one literary work in relation to other of similar type. Thus, for example, Hamlet's revenge of his father's death can be linked with myths from other cultures that include a son's avenging his father. Or the story of Hamlet can be linked with others in which the corruption poisoning a country has been eliminated through some action taken by the hero.

Questions to Analyze "Young Goodman Brown" from a Mythological Perspective:

- 1. What incidents in the work seem common or familiar enough as actions that they might be considered symbolic or archetypal? Are there any journeys, battles, falls, reversals of fortune?**
- 2. What kinds of character types appear in the work? How might they be classified?**
- 3. What creatures, elements of nature, or man-made objects playing a role in the work might be considered symbolic?**
- 4. What changes do the characters undergo? How can those changes be characterized or named? To what might they be related or compared? What religious or quasi-religious traditions might the work's story, character elements or objects be compared to or affiliated with? Why?**

CRITICAL THEORY: HISTORICAL
PERSPECTIVES

Literary works are born out of very specific moments in history. The work is infused with the values and events of that time, and, conversely, a powerful piece of literature can effectively influence the thinking and actions of its body of readers. As such, considering the time period in which a literary work was created and the context of the story itself is an important analytical task. Historical criticism explores the historical, social, political, and cultural contexts surrounding the creation and reception of a work of literature; it uses history as a means of understanding a literary work more clearly.

Historicists aim simultaneously to understand the work through its historical context and to understand cultural and intellectual history through literature. Historical critics approach literature in two ways:

1. They provide a context of background information necessary for understanding how literary works were perceived in their time.
2. They show how literary works reflect ideas and attitudes of the time in which they were written.

These two general approaches to *historical* criticism represent methods and approaches that might be termed “old historicism” and “new historicism” respectively.

OLD HISTORICISM

Historical criticism examines both the time period within the story and the time period in which the story was written. The responses of the original audience are of interest to the historical critic, as are the meanings and implications of specific words, symbols, images, and characters through time. We can hardly understand characters' lives without some sense of the time and place in which they lived, and we can hardly understand the author's purpose without understanding the cultural norms and events during the writing of the work. For example, in *Sense and Sensibility*, written by Jane Austen in 1795, when Margaret is talking about a man of no profession it contains a different meaning than it would today. During Austen's time in England, the man without a profession would have been a gentleman, a man of wealth.

NEW HISTORICISM

Like the earlier historical approaches, a more contemporary approach identified as “new historicism” considers historical contexts of literary works essential for understanding them. A significant difference, however, between earlier historical criticism and new historicism is the newer variety's emphasis on analyzing historical documents with the same intensity and scrutiny given foregrounded passages in the literary works to be interpreted.

STRENGTHS OF THIS THEORY

New historicists analyze the cultural context embedded in the literary work and explain its relationship with the network of the assumptions and beliefs that inform social institutions and cultural practices prevalent in the historical period when the literary work was written.

WEAKNESSES OF THIS THEORY

One potential danger is that historical information and documents may be foregrounded and emphasized so heavily that the reader may lose sight of the literary work the historical

approach is designed to illuminate.

HOW TO WRITE FROM A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The challenge for historical understanding is to ascertain what the past was truly like and how its values are inscribed in its cultural artifacts, including its literature. One common strategy of new historicist critics is to compare and contrast the language of contemporaneous documents and literary works to reveal hidden assumptions, biases, and cultural attitudes that relate to two kinds of texts, literary and documentary, usually to demonstrate how the literary work shares the cultural assumptions of the document.

An important feature of new historicist criticism is its concern with examining the power relations of rulers and subjects. A guiding assumption among many new historicist critics is that texts, not only literary works but also documents, diaries, records, even institutions such as hospitals and prisons, are ideological products culturally constructed from the prevailing power structures that dominate particular societies. Reading a literary work from a new historicist perspective thus becomes an exercise in uncovering the conflicting and subversive perspectives of the marginalized and suppressed.

Questions to Analyze “A Rose for Emily” from a Historical Perspective:

- 1. When was the work written? When was it published? How was it received by the critics and the public? Why?**
- 2. What does the work’s reception reveal about the standards of taste and value during the time it was published and reviewed?**
- 3. What social attitudes and cultural practices related to the action of the work were prevalent during the time the work was written and published?**
- 4. To what extent can we understand the past as it is reflected in the literary work? To what extent does the work reflect differences from the ideas and values of its time?**

