

## CRITICAL APPROACHES TO LITERATURE

Literary Criticism is used to understand and judge literature. Understanding is furthered through making personal or experiential connections to a text, through analysis of the form and content and through questioning relationships that exist within the text.



### Personal Experience

Reader Response  
Historical/Biographical

### Form

Formalism  
Archetypal

### Relationships

Gender  
Marxist  
Psychoanalytical



**Reader Response:** analyzes the reader's role in the production of meaning. In reader response criticism, the reader creates the meaning. Norman Holland argues that "each reader will impose his or her 'identity theme' on the text, to a large extent recreating that text in the reader's image." Therefore, we can understand someone's reading as a function of personal identity.

**Historical/Biographical:** sees works as the reflection of an author's life and times (or of the characters' life and times). They believe it is necessary to know about the author and the political, economical, and sociological context of his times in order to truly understand his works.

**Formalism:** believes that all information essential to the interpretation of a work must be found within the work itself; there is no need to bring in outside information about the history, politics, or society of the time, or about the author's life. Formalistic critics spend much time analyzing irony, paradox, imagery, and metaphor. They are also interested in the work's setting, characters, symbols, and point of view.

**Gender:** examines how sexual identity influences the creation and reception of literary works. Also, how images of men and women in literature reflect or reject the social forces that have historically kept the sexes from achieving equality. Many critics look at how patriarchal attitudes have dominated Western literature and challenge the resulting gender assumptions.

**Marxist:** focuses on the assumptions and values about matters such as race, class, and power. Marxist criticism, based largely on the writings of Karl Marx, typically aims at revealing and correcting social injustices. Marxist criticism focuses more on the content and themes of literature than on its form.

**Psychoanalytical:** examines the psychological being of the author of a literary work or the characters in a particular work. A psychoanalytical reading might include an analysis of psyche (Id, Ego, and Superego), unconscious desires and fears, motivations, defense mechanisms, or family dynamics. One might also analyze the dialogue or words in the text to uncover different or hidden meanings.

**Archetypal:** assumes that there is a collection of symbols, images, characters, and motifs that evoke the same basic response in all people. According to the psychologist **Carl Jung**, mankind possesses a "**collective unconscious**" that contains these archetypes and that is common to all of humanity. Myth critics identify these archetypal patterns and discuss how they function in the works. They believe that these archetypes are the source of much of literature's power.