



Literary Criticism

Here are brief definitions of the most popular ways with which to judge and interpret literature. By knowing some of these theories, you will not only be able to interpret literature critically for yourself, but understand others' judgments as well. The names of theoreticians are in parentheses.

Cultural Studies examines race, class, and gender roles in the work.

Deconstruction Theory, also called Post-Structuralism, examines the role of meaning in the work, especially in who defines the meaning of the words or text. (Jacques Derrida)

Feminist Theory examines the role of women in literature and works created by women. (Julia Kristeva)

Formalistic Criticism examines the structural elements of the work (point of view, themes, relationship and arrangement of episodes, characterizations). (Cleanth Brooks)

Hermeneutics examines the separate parts of work and then combines the parts into an understanding of the whole work. (Hans-Georg Gadamer)

Historical Criticism examines how events & experiences of the author's life are integrated into the work.

Moral Theory/Neo-Humanism examines the moral and ethical systems in the work. (Paul More)

Mythological/Archetypal Criticism examines the work for archetypal symbols, mythical structures, rituals, and patterns. (Carl Jung)

Psychological/Psychoanalytical Criticism examines the work from the psychic state of the author and characters. (Sigmund Freud)

Reader-Response Criticism examines how readers interpret a work and how that interpretation is shaped by the author and culture. (Stanley Fish)

Sociological Criticism examines the society that is depicted in the work (George Orwell).

Speech-Act Theory examines everyday speech and societal actions. (Jurgen Habermas)

Structuralism examines the linguistic patterns, such as narrative and symbols, in the work.

Thematic/Symbolic Criticism examines the language of the work for patterns of images, motifs, and symbols which give meaning to the work.