An Overview of Critical Approaches to Literature

As X. J. Kennedy claims, “literary criticism is not an abstract, intellectual exercise; it is a natural human response to literature.” The purpose of literary criticism is, at least, to help you to solve a problem in the reading and to enable you to form judgments about literature. The following is a brief survey of the chief current approaches to literature. You may find, as you read them, that one or another approach sounds especially congenial, and you may therefore want to make use of it in your reading and writing. On the other hand, it’s important to remember that works of literature are highly varied and it may be best to try to respond to each text in the way that the text seems to require rather than to read all texts according to a single formula. All of the following approaches may help to deepen your understanding and appreciation of the literary works that you read.

1. Historical / Biographical Approach

Historical / Biographical critics see works as a window onto the past or a 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 and fully understand his works.

2. Moral / Philosophical Approach

The moral / philosophical approach is as old as classical Greek and Roman critics. For example, Plato emphasized moralism and utilitarianism; Horace stressed that literature should be delightful and instructive. Moral / philosophical critics believe that the larger function of literature is to teach morality and to probe philosophical issues.

3. Formalism / New Criticism

A formalistic approach to literature, once called New Criticism, encourages a close reading of the text. Formalistic critics read literature as an independent work of art and focus on the intrinsic elements in a literary work, such as its language, structure, irony, paradox, symbol, imagery, metaphor as well as some larger elements such as plot, setting, characters, and narrative technique. They believe that all information essential to the interpretation of a work must be found within the autonomous work itself; there is no need to bring in extrinsic matters (outside information) about the history, politics, or society of the time, or about the author's life. Therefore, they do not view works through the lens of feminism, psychology, mythology, or any other such standpoint, and they are not interested in the work's affect on the reader.

4. Psychological Approach

Psychological critics view works through the lens of psychology. Most frequently, psychological critics apply Freudian psychology to works. 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 they 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, such as Hamlet.

5. Mythological / Archetypal

A mythological / archetypal approach to literature assumes that there is a collection of symbols, images, characters, and motifs (i.e. archetypes) that evokes basically the same 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. Some archetypes:

- archetypal women - the Good Mother, the Terrible Mother, and the Soul Mate (such as the Virgin Mary)
- water - creation, birth-death-resurrection, purification, redemption, fertility, growth
- garden - paradise (Eden), innocence, fertility
- tree – life, growth, immortality
- desert - spiritual emptiness, death, hopelessness
- red - blood, sacrifice, passion, disorder
- green - growth, fertility
- black - chaos, death, evil
- serpent - evil, sensuality, mystery, wisdom, destruction
- seven - perfection
- hero archetype - The hero is involved in a quest (in which he overcomes obstacles). He experiences initiation (involving a separation, transformation, and return), and finally he serves as a scapegoat, that is, he dies to atone.

6. Feminist Approach

Like other forms of sociological criticism, feminist criticism places literature in a social context, and its analyses often have sociopolitical purposes which might explain, for example, how images of women in literature reflect the patriarchal social forces that have impeded women’s efforts to achieve full equality with men, or how women are excluded, suppressed, and exploited. Simone de Beauvoir’s famous statement “One is not born a woman, one becomes one” suggests that our conceptions of femininity are social constructions that are imposed on individuals. In feminist criticism, how women have written and how women have been written are the two pervasive concerns.

7. Reader-Response Criticism

Reader-response criticism, as its name implies, focuses its attention on the reader rather than the work itself. Reader-response critics do not assume that a literary work is a finished product
with fixed formal properties, as, for example, formalist critics do. Instead, the literary work is seen as an evolving creation of the reader’s as he or she reads actively. In reader-response criticism, the text itself has no meaning until it is read by a reader. The reader creates the meaning. On the other hand, reader-response criticism calls attention to how we read and what influences our readings. It is not a rationale for mistaken or bizarre readings of works but an exploration of the possibilities for a plurality of readings shaped by the readers’ experience with the text. This approach can help us understand how our responses are shaped by both the text and ourselves.