

Critical Approaches

Structuralism

To say that an author has an original idea, and then communicates that idea to the audience, would seem to be so obvious as to be a waste of time. Structuralist critics would disagree with it, however.

They would say that what appears to be original thought is really bound within a limited structure of what it is possible to say.

Structuralism tries to look past the elements that might make a story seem original and find the pattern underneath. Most often this takes the form of identifying important *binary oppositions*, a pair of ideas which together account for all possibilities, such as good/evil, male/female, order/chaos, domination/submission. These binary oppositions are seen to be the basis for how we make sense of the world, and often one half is valued over the other, sometimes for no real reason.

Marxism/Political Theory

Divisions of power and wealth in society must have a certain way of seeing the world in order to remain stable and consistent. Generally, these ways of seeing favor those in power. For example, the concept of the divine right of kings relied on a certain way of understanding Christianity, and those who believed in it had no legitimate way of challenging the monarch's authority. The ways of seeing that support our systems now (which we will refer to as *ideologies*) are sometimes hard for us to see. Marxism is one way to examine the ideologies that support capitalism.

This approach to literature looks for the ways in which texts help reinforce or subvert these ideologies. Critics look for subtle ways in which power is gained or lost, and how we are supposed to view people's actions depending on their social position (for example, we might approve of strong authority figures, or support oppressed people who revolt). The character's class background and the source of their wealth is considered closely, especially if those areas are ignored or suppressed by the text.

Psychoanalytic Theory

This approach to literature makes liberal use of the work of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung and their successors, emphasizing the role of the subconscious in human behavior. Sometimes this leads the critic to consider a work to be a mirror into the author's psyche, where the psychological problems of the author show up symbolically in the text. Much of Freud's work examines how much of our childhood is learning

to repress the desires we cannot fulfill. These repressed desires get lodged in our subconscious, and so can come out without our control. Sometimes language (or the writings of an author) can have symbolic meanings of which the speaker is unaware. Freud was most concerned with repressed sexual desires, so a lot of Freudian readings look for sexual symbolism, but that is not always the case. In some cases, critics might look for ways in which repression shared through a society is revealed in the text.

Feminist Theory

This approach to literature places the lives and works of women at the center of literary analysis. This school began with the goal of inserting woman authors into the canon and highlighting some who had been overlooked for many years. More recently, feminist literary theory has challenged the assumptions about language itself as well as revisiting important texts to ask new questions of them. Some typical questions might include: Does the action of the story promote the idea that certain "feminine qualities" are ingrained in women, when they might really be a societal construct (or, the same question for masculine values)? If the viewpoint of the story is a man's, how does that contribute to a framing of the action? Does the text value "masculine" values at the expense of "feminine" values?