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## **Literary Text Interpretation: Use of Different Critical Approaches**

Mark Twain once shrewdly observed that a person who chooses not to read has no advantage over a person whom is unable to read. In industrialized societies today, however, the question is not who reads, because nearly everyone can and does, but what is read. Why should anyone spend precious time with literature when there is so much reading material available that provides useful information about everything from the daily news to personal computers?

Certainly, one of the most important values of literature is that it nourishes our emotional lives. In addition to appealing to our emotions, literature broadens our perspective on the world. It is true, of course, that many people go through life without reading imaginative literature, but that is a loss rather than a gain. They may find themselves troubled by the same kinds of questions that reveal Daisy Buchanan's restless, vague discontentment in F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby": "What'll do we with ourselves this afternoon? – Cried Daisy, – and the day after that, and the next thirty years?"

To discover the insights that literature reveals requires careful reading and analyses.

There are many ways to approach a text, and a useful first step is to develop a sense of direction, an understanding of how an approach shapes a discussion of a text. There are a great variety of approaches for reading fiction, poetry, or drama. Some of them have long been practiced by readers who have used the insights gleaned from biography and history to illuminate literary works as well as more recent approaches, such as feminist, reader-response. Each of them is sensitive to point of view, symbol, tone, irony and other literary elements. The formalist approach emphasizes how the elements within a work achieve, their effects, whereas biographical and psychological approaches lead outward from the work to consider the author's life and other writings. Even broader approaches, such as historical and sociological, connect the work to historic, social and economic forces. Mythological interpretations represent the broadest approach, because the cultural and universal response readers have to a work.

The following overview of approaches should help the reader to develop an

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appreciation of the intriguing possibilities that attend literary interpretation.

Formalist critics focus on the formal elements of a work – its language, structure and tone. A formalist reads literature as an independent work of art rather than as a reflection of the author's state of mind or as a representation of a moment in history. Formalists offer intense examinations of the relationship between form and meaning within a work, emphasizing the subtle complexity of how a work is arranged. This kind of close reading pays special attention to what are often described as intrinsic matters in a literary text such as irony, paradox, metaphor, symbol as well as macro elements of the text – plot, characterization and narrative technique. Formalists examine how these elements work together to give a coherence of the text while contributing to its meaning. Other kinds of information that go beyond the text – Biography, history, politics, psychology, and so on – are typically regarded by formalists as extrinsic matters, which are considerably less important than what goes on within the text.

For an example of a work in which the shape of the plot serves as the main organizing principle, let's examine Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour", a two-page short story. A first reading probably is a surprise at the story's ending – a wife suddenly dies of a heart attack, because her loving husband has not been killed in a train accident, but is alive. A formalist approach for analyzing this story would be to raise questions about the ironic ending, would look back over the story for signs of the ending in the imagery. The symbolic evocation of renewal and rebirth – the breath of rain, the birds singing, new spring life – causes her to feel "free, free, free!" The time line of the story – one-hour – helps to show the changes in the life of Mrs. Mallard.

Knowledge of an author's life can help readers understand his or her work more fully. Events in a work might follow actual events in a writer's life just as characters might be based on people known by the author. The biographical approach relates the author's life and thought to his or her works. Usually the author's life is reflection of his or her time and is thus an important aspect of the historical approach. Sometimes the writer may be ahead of his time, or the writer may be the predominant figure of the time, or the writer's life may have been the major source of his literary material. For whatever reason, a writer's life may shed light on his or her literature. The interest of some biographical information is often evident even for the work of writers like Shakespeare of whom full-scale biographies can hardly be written because full knowledge is lacking.

The biographical approach has two major advantages. First, it helps to

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illuminate elements within a work – words, allusions to local and historical events, conflicts, themes, characters, and setting. Learning, for example, that F.Scott Fitzgerald had an ambivalent attitude toward people with great wealth prompts us to look for a similar ambivalence in his work (3). Second, works often take on an added significance when we see them as expressions of authors' deep concerns and conflicts. The more we empathize with a writer's problems, the more meaningful his or her works may seem to us.

One danger, if we use the biographical approach, is that it may substitute the criticism of a life for the criticism of a work. Lives of writers often have intrinsic interest – although the biography of a great artist can be surprisingly dull – and may be recounted without any attempt at literary criticism. But when the judgement of a man's private affairs is extended into a judgement of his art, the result is likely to be a distortion.

However, it is also worth mentioning that biographical information can complicate a work. Chopin's "Story of an Hour" presents a repressed wife's momentary discovery of what freedom from her husband might mean to her. She awakens to a new sense of herself when she learns of her husband's death, only to collapse of a heart attack when she sees that he is alive. Readers might be tempted, to interpret – this story as Chopin's fictionalized commentary about her own marriage, because her husband died twelve years before she wrote the story and seven years before she began writing fiction seriously. Biographers seem to agree that Chopi's marriage was evidently satisfying to her and she did not feel oppressed.

Historical criticism is a method of studying literature by period and movement (5). This approach recognizes that literary phenomena – methods of composition, subject matter, and philosophical outlook – characterize various historical periods. Thus, the use of blank verse in plays characterizes the Shakespearean era; an emphasis on free will – the Romantic Movement; a focus on social conflict – the 1930s. The historical approach has several goals: to study a work's relationship to its own and other periods, to learn more about a writer's culture, to place the work within an evolving tradition. But the most important goal of historical criticism is to illuminate the work. John Steinbeck depicted the social dislocations of poor people in the 1930s, and by studying their problems and the social theories prominent then, we understand his themes better.

Historians use literature as a window onto the past, because literature frequently provides the nuances of an historic period that cannot be readily perceived through other sources. The characters in Harriet Beecher Stowe's 'Uncle Tom's Cabin'

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display, for example, a complex set of white attitudes toward blacks in mid-nineteenth century America that is absent from more traditional historic documents .The plot pattern of pursuit, escape, capture in nineteenth century slave narratives had a significant influence on Stowe's plotting of action in "Uncle Tom's Cabin". This relationship demonstrates that the writing contemporary to an author is an important element of the history that helps to shape a work.

Psychological approaches attempt to apply modern psychological theories to authors and their works. Critics use such approaches to explore the motivations of characters and the symbolic meanings of events, writer's own motivations and reader's personal responses to a text. Because of the predominance of Freudian psychology in the twenties century, psychological criticism usually relies upon the theories of Sigmund Freud. Freud's ideas are complex and multiple not all of them relate to literature. But literary critics (4) find three of them very attractive: the dominance of the unconscious mind over the conscious, the expression of the unconscious mind through symbols, in dreams and the primacy of sexuality as a motivating force in human behavior. These three ideas are related.

Many authors purposely incorporate psychological theories in their works. Eugene O'Neill, Sherwood Anderson, Tennessee Williams were familiar with Freudian psychology. Examples of stream-of-consciousness narration are William Faulkner's "The Sound and the Fury", Virginia Woolf's "To the Lighthouse", O'Neill's "Strange Interlude".

Many other works of literature are also rich fields for psychological criticism, even though they may not have been directly influenced by psychological theories. Critics are interested in any works that are dreamlike, as Lewis Carroll's "Alice in Wonderland".

There are certain difficulties and dangers in the psychological interpretation of literature. First, one may be tempted to read a work as simply a psychological document revealing the peculiarities of its author. The cheapest sensational novel may to a well-trained reader suggest as much about the personality of the novelist as the subtle fiction of Edith Wharton reveals about the peculiar traits of its author. It is important to distinguish the possible clinical interest of a writer's production from its literary value.

Second, we may be tempted to make a psychological interpretation do more than it properly can. We are often in danger of reducing the complex art of a writer to psychological theory. Even with a work to which this analysis is appropriate, such as Sherwood Anderson's tales of loneliness, frustration, and violence, the rich

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and unique quality of the writing and the complication of style and theme should make for something more than the meaning of a case history illustrating psychological ideas.

Sociological approaches examine social groups, relationships and values as they are manifested in literature. These approaches emphasize more the nature and effect of the social forces that shape power relationships between groups of people. Social criticism is similar to historical criticism in recognizing literature as a reflection of its environment. It would focus, for example, on the ways in which Jane Austen's novels depict the emphasis on decorum and etiquette by the English country gentry around the nineteenth century. Social critics were most active in the 1930s during the Great Depression. They applauded literature that depicted the struggles of the poor and especially when they engaged in strikes against oppressive capitalist bosses. Examples of literature with such strong "proletarian" elements are the works of Charles Dickens, John Steinbeck, and Theodor Dreiser. The social critics usually approved of a socialist solution to the problems of the oppressed.

Feminist criticism is a form of sociological approach, it places literature in a social context and. its analyses often have sociopolitical purposes, purposes that 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. Feminists have analyzed literature by both men and women in an effort to understand literary representations of women as well as the writers and cultures that create them. Feminist critics' approach to literature is characterized, "by the use of a broad, range of disciplines, including history, sociology, psychology and linguistics, to provide a perspective sensitive to feminist issues.

As you see, approaches described require specialized knowledge, knowledge of disciplines other than literature, literary works are never purely literary, as music is purely musical. All critical approaches use extra literary disciplines – "biography, history, psychology, economics, anthropology, religion, philosophy and other relevant fields of knowledge which are justified not in the abstract but to the extent that they illuminate particular literary works. The reader of literature who has some breadth of experience in these subjects, who has achieved some of that culture which is the aim of a general education, is to be a more perceptive and thus a more

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\* Зірочкою (перед словом) ми позначаємо іменники, вжиті в "Енеїді" лише в односкладовій формі називного-знахідного відмінків однини і умовно віднесені до іменників з флексивним наголосом в однині на тій підставі, що в "Словарі української мови" за ред. Б.Грінченка вони мають флексивну

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