English 200, Section 8:

Introduction to Literature

HANDOUTS

CRITICAL APPROACHES TO LITERATURE

Described below are nine common critical approaches to the literature.

Quotations are from X.J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia's \_Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, and Drama\_, Sixth Edition (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), pages 1790-1818.

\* **Formalist Criticism**: This approach regards literature as "a unique form of

human knowledge that needs to be examined on its own terms." All the

elements necessary for understanding the work are contained within the

work itself. Of particular interest to the formalist critic are the

elements of form-style, structure, tone, imagery, etc.-that are found

within the text. A primary goal for formalist critics is to determine how

such elements work together with the text's content to shape its effects

upon readers.

\* **Biographical Criticism**: This approach "begins with the simple but central

insight that literature is written by actual people and that understanding

an author's life can help readers more thoroughly comprehend the work."

Hence, it often affords a practical method by which readers can better

understand a text. However, a biographical critic must be careful not to

take the biographical facts of a writer's life too far in criticizing the

works of that writer: the biographical critic "focuses on explicating the

literary work by using the insight provided by knowledge of the author's

life.... [B]iographical data should amplify the meaning of the text, not

drown it out with irrelevant material."

\* **Historical Criticism**: This approach "seeks to understand a literary work

by investigating the social, cultural, and intellectual context that

produced it-a context that necessarily includes the artist's biography and

milieu." A key goal for historical critics is to understand the effect of

a literary work upon its original readers.

\* **Gender Criticism**: This approach "examines how sexual identity influences

the creation and reception of literary works." Originally an offshoot of

feminist movements, gender criticism today includes a number of

approaches, including the so-called "masculinist" approach recently

advocated by poet Robert Bly. The bulk of gender criticism, however, is

feminist and takes as a central precept that the patriarchal attitudes

that have dominated western thought have resulted, consciously or

unconsciously, in literature "full of unexamined 'male-produced'

assumptions." Feminist criticism attempts to correct this imbalance by

analyzing and combatting such attitudes-by questioning, for example, why

none of the characters in Shakespeare's play Othello ever challenge the

right of a husband to murder a wife accused of adultery. Other goals of

feminist critics include "analyzing how sexual identity influences the

reader of a text" and "examin[ing] how the images of men and women in

imaginative literature reflect or reject the social forces that have

historically kept the sexes from achieving total equality."

\* **Psychological Criticism**: This approach reflects the effect that modern

psychology has had upon both literature and literary criticism.

Fundamental figures in psychological criticism include Sigmund Freud,

whose "psychoanalytic theories changed our notions of human behavior by

exploring new or controversial areas like wish-fulfillment, sexuality, the

unconscious, and repression" as well as expanding our understanding of how

"language and symbols operate by demonstrating their ability to reflect

unconscious fears or desires"; and Carl Jung, whose theories about the

unconscious are also a key foundation of mythological criticism (see

below). Psychological criticism has a number of approaches, but in

general, it usually employs one (or more) of three approaches:

1. An investigation of "the creative process of the artist: what is the

nature of literary genius and how does it relate to normal mental

functions?"

2. The psychological study of a particular artist, usually noting how

an author's biographical circumstances affect or influence their

motivations and/or behavior.

3. The analysis of fictional characters using the language and methods

of psychology.

\* **Sociological Criticism**: This approach "examines literature in the

cultural, economic and political context in which it is written or

received," exploring the relationships between the artist and society.

Sometimes it examines the artist's society to better understand the

author's literary works; other times, it may examine the representation of

such societal elements within the literature itself. One influential type

of sociological criticism is Marxist criticism, which focuses on the

economic and political elements of art, often emphasizing the ideological

content of literature; because Marxist criticism often argues that all art

is political, either challenging or endorsing (by silence) the status quo,

it is frequently evaluative and judgmental, a tendency that "can lead to

reductive judgment, as when Soviet critics rated Jack London better than

William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, Edith Wharton, and Henry James,

because he illustrated the principles of class struggle more clearly."

Nonetheless, Marxist criticism "can illuminate political and economic

dimensions of literature other approaches overlook."

\* **Mythological Criticism (Archetypal Criticism)**: This approach emphasizes "the recurrent

universal

patterns underlying most literary works." Combining the insights from

anthropology, psychology, history, and comparative religion, mythological

criticism "explores the artist's common humanity by tracing how the

individual imagination uses myths and symbols common to different cultures

and epochs." One key concept in mythlogical criticism is the archetype, "a

symbol, character, situation, or image that evokes a deep universal

response," which entered literary criticism from Swiss psychologist Carl

Jung. According to Jung, all individuals share a "`collective

unconscious,' a set of primal memories common to the human race, existing

below each person's conscious mind"-often deriving from primordial

phenomena such as the sun, moon, fire, night, and blood, archetypes

according to Jung "trigger the collective unconscious." Another critic,

Northrop Frye, defined archetype in a more limited way as "a symbol,

usually an image, which recurs often enough in literature to be

recognizable as an element of one's literary experience as a whole."

Regardless of the definition of archetype they use, mythological critics

tend to view literary works in the broader context of works sharing a

similar pattern.

\* **Reader-Response Criticism**: This approach takes as a fundamental tenet that

"literature" exists not as an artifact upon a printed page but as a

transaction between the physical text and the mind of a reader. It

attempts "to describe what happens in the reader's mind while interpreting

a text" and reflects that reading, like writing, is a creative process.

According to reader-response critics, literary texts do not "contain" a

meaning; meanings derive only from the act of individual readings. Hence,

two different readers may derive completely different interpretations of

the same literary text; likewise, a reader who re-reads a work years later

may find the work shockingly different. Reader-response criticism, then,

emphasizes how "religious, cultural, and social values affect readings; it

also overlaps with gender criticism in exploring how men and women read

the same text with different assumptions." Though this approach rejects

the notion that a single "correct" reading exists for a literary work, it

does not consider all readings permissible: "Each text creates limits to

its possible interpretations."

\* **Deconstructionist Criticism**: This approach "rejects the traditional

assumption that language can accurately represent reality."

Deconstructionist critics regard language as a fundamentally unstable

medium-the words "tree" or "dog," for instance, undoubtedly conjure up

different mental images for different people-and therefore, because

literature is made up of words, literature possesses no fixed, single

meaning. According to critic Paul de Man, deconstructionists insist on

"the impossibility of making the actual expression coincide with what has

to be expressed, of making the actual signs [i.e., words] coincide with

what is signified." As a result, deconstructionist critics tend to

emphasize not what is being said but how language is used in a text. The

methods of this approach tend to resemble those of formalist criticism,

but whereas formalists' primary goal is to locate unity within a text,

"how the diverse elements of a text cohere into meaning,"

deconstructionists try to show how the text "deconstructs," "how it can be

broken down ... into mutually irreconcilable positions." Other goals of

deconstructionists include (1) challenging the notion of authors'

"ownership" of texts they create (and their ability to control the meaning

of their texts) and (2) focusing on how language is used to achieve power,

as when they try to understand how a some interpretations of a literary

work come to be regarded as "truth."

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