

A Brief Overview of Literary Criticism



Woman Reading Book in a Landscape, Camille Corot

Literary Critical Theory is a tool that helps you find meaning in stories, poems and plays. There are many different ways to interpret a novel or short story.

When we read literature, we do so to learn more about:

- The human condition
- The experience of loss and death
- The structure of power in society and how it is implemented (including the issues that surround race and gender).
- The psychology of characters and individuals in general
- The sociology and history of cultures that produce specific pieces of literature

Literary Theory helps us discover the things listed above in the books and stories we read. So how do you use theory to read a book? Before exploring, in brief, different theories, it is important to develop a reading strategy that will help you form ideas.

You should keep a reading notebook and write down ideas and information as you read. Here is a checklist of things to notice:

- Title: How does it pertain to the story? Does it symbolize events or people in the story?
- Narration: Who is telling the story? How does the narrator approach the topic?
- Subject: What is the basic situation? What is happening to the characters and how are they reacting to events?
- Mood: What is the mood of the story, i.e. the emotional background? How is it expressed in the language and setting?
- Characters: What do the characters learn in the course of the story? What are their failings and how do they overcome them, or not? What is the main character's desire? Is that desire ever fulfilled? How does the main character change?
- Character Interaction: How do the characters interact in the story? How do they communicate with each other? How do they handle conflict?
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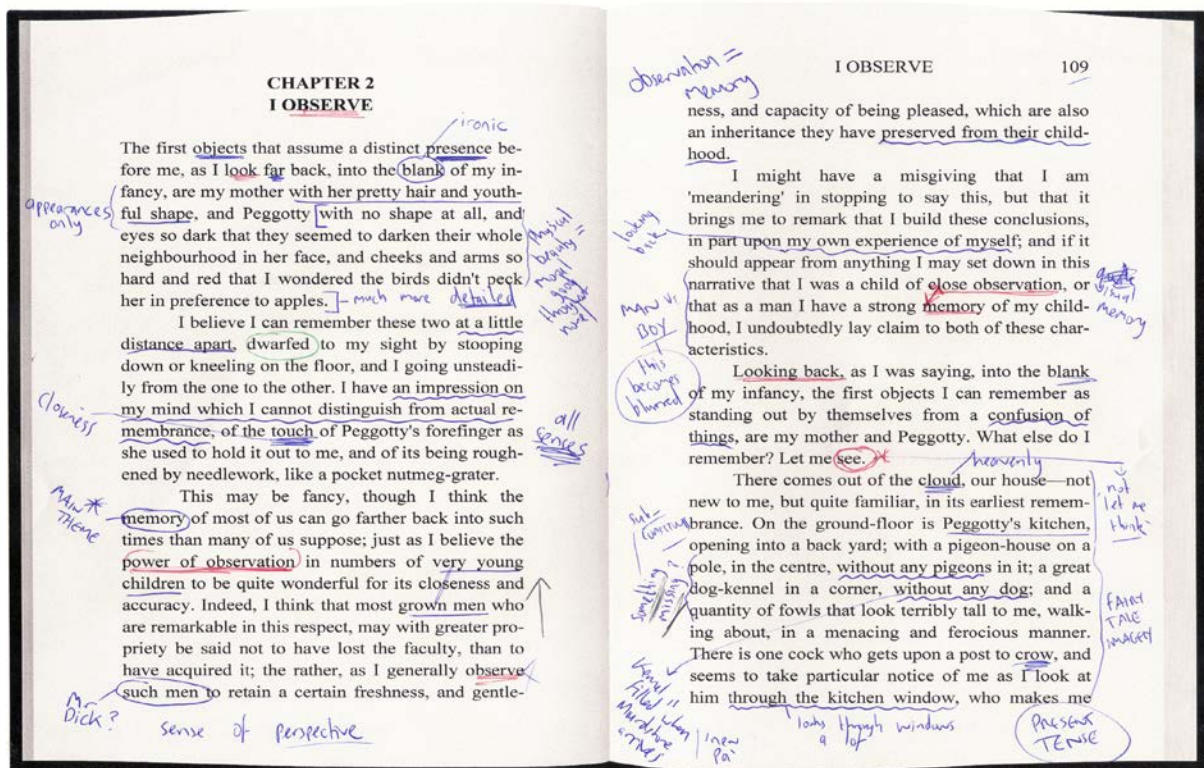
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When you read a book, you can highlight the passages that strike you as significant. You can also write notes in the margin of the text to yourself, which is called “annotation.”



Example of an Annotated Book

Literary Criticism In Brief:

This handout provides information on four theories; however, keep in mind there are many different kinds of theories, including gender/feminist criticism; race theory; Marxist; Biographical; Deconstruction; Structuralism; Post-colonial critical theory.

The Five Critical Literary Theories that we will learn about in this class include:

- Formalism or New Criticism
- Reader Response Theory
- Psychoanalytical Theory
- New Historicism Analysis
- Post-Colonial Theory



Empire of Light by René Magritte

Formalism or New Criticism:

This approach views each piece of literature that possesses all of its meaning inside the text. Meaning does not exist outside the text. In other words, the history behind the text or its author's biography do not contribute to the text's theme or content. To analyze literature through formalism, you will focus on the style, structure, tone, imagery, etc. You will analyze how certain elements work together to create meaning within a text.

Example: Tim O'Brien's story "The Things They Carry" (about his experience in the Vietnam War) is analyzed not by using his biography or history to interpret the story. Instead, you look at all elements inside the work: diction (use of language), character, plot, metaphor, and imagery. Key questions a Formalist Critic asks:

- How does the language and other literary elements convey a specific representation of the Vietnam War?
- What are dominant metaphors and imagery and what do they symbolize?



The Reading, Frederico Zandomenighi

Reader Response Criticism

This approach views "literature" not as an object, like formalism does, but as a dynamic interaction between the text and reader. This theory holds that there are many different ways to interpret the text based on the reader's cultural, religious, economic, etc. background. In other words, readers bring their own thoughts, views, experiences and attitudes to the text and interpret the

story through a personal lens. This critical theory is often used to discuss a text in a classroom setting where students are supposed to provide their own insights on the literature read.

Example: You can easily apply this theory to “The Things They Carried.” For instance, if you have experienced war, you can discuss it in relation to how O’Brien represents war. If you were raised in the 1970s during the Vietnam War, you can reflect on your memory of that time period and use it to find meaning in the story. If you have personal and religious ideas of war, you can use that to interpret the text. Key questions a Reader Response critic asks:

- How does the interaction between the text and reader create meaning?
- How do the images and language in the work influence or affect the reader?
- What shapes our knowledge of reading, what is our purpose of reading and how does that influence how we read a particular story, poem or novel?



Psychological Influences

Psychoanalytical Criticism

Based on the theories of Freud, this criticism centers on the psychology of the characters and analyzes character motivation, behavior and actions. If you can figure out the protagonist’s psychology, then you can use that to interpret the text. The theory is also used to analyze the author’s state of mind. There are two main offshoots of this critical theory:

- It investigates the psychology of particular writer focusing how an author’s biographical situations affect or influence their selection of theme and use of literary techniques.
- It analyzes fictional characters using the concepts, terms and methods of psychological theories.

Example: To apply this theory to O’Brien’s short story you can ask explore the narrator’s psychology in the face of war; How does the Vietnam War influence, both negatively and positively, his psychology? What does the soldiers’ behavior reveal about the psychological stresses of war? Key questions a psychological critic asks:

- What does the work suggest about the psychological aspects of the author?
- Does the work have any hidden meanings, or subconscious elements that help to interpret the work?
- How can characters’ actions be explained using theories of fear or attraction to death, or using the struggle between the id, ego and the superego?

New Historicism Criticism



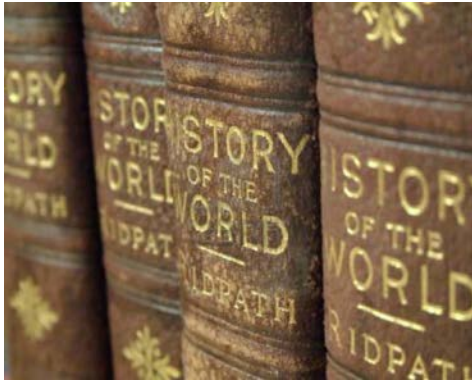
Ancient Text Written in Latin

Here, you research the historical time period and discuss the work within its historical context. This theory looks at the cultural makeup of a certain era and the ideas and values that define that era. The text serves as a “retelling of history” and, if viewed as a historical document, can supply a radically different viewpoint than what is commonly known about an event, era and/or person. New Historicism also provides cultural and historical critique as well as helping the reader to find new meanings in a text.

Example: To analyze O’Brien, you’d research the Vietnam War, or a specific battle of that war, and analyze the story using historical fact and detail. Key questions a New Historicism critic asks:

- How does the portrayal criticize the event and the political figures around it?
- How does the text change meaning when read by a different generation that experiences different kinds of war?
- What language/characters/events/setting reflect the current events, political and cultural, of the author’s time period?

Post-Colonial Criticism:



Using this critical method, you will analyze issues that are caused by centuries colonialism, like England’s economic role in India and Africa in the 1800 and 1900s. This theory includes the dynamics of racism and Third World politics. If you applied this theory to “The Things They Carried,” you would research Vietnam as a former colony of France and how/why the United States, as a powerful and wealthy country, became involved in a civil war there. Some questions a post-colonial critic might ask:

- How did the American intervention in Vietnam change the social and cultural climate there and how does O’Brien represent those changes in his story?
- What issues of race are associated with the Vietnam War and how are they depicted in the literature?
- What caused the Vietnam War and how were those causes linked to the world powers at the time? How does the story relate to or describe those causes?