

## TYPES OF LITERARY CRITICISM

Definition: Criticism is the act of evaluating or interpreting a work of art or the act of developing general guidelines or principles for such evaluation or interpretation. Helps deepen our understanding of artistic works, creates new meanings and understandings about works, and about ourselves as individuals and as humans.

**\*Biographical** – attempts to **account for elements of literary works by relating them to events in the lives of their authors.** Example: Mary Shelley lost her mother when she gave birth to Mary. Her novel **Frankenstein** heavily focuses on the role of a parent in one's development. The creature in her novel is also said to have come from a waking dream Mary had.

Your example(s):

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**\*Deconstructionist criticism** – **Calls into question the idea that there is one "meaning" behind a literary work by inviting the reader to reverse binary relationships in a work.** Example: Even though he is the evil Darth Vader for most of the films, Anakin Skywalker is the real hero of the original Star Wars trilogy, not Luke Skywalker, because Anakin destroys the Sith.

Your example(s):

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**\*Didactic** – evaluates **works of art in the terms of moral, ethical, or political messages that they convey.** (Banned books such as Huckleberry Finn are often examples of didactic critics). Example: In **To Kill a Mockingbird**, Harper Lee offers harsh criticism of the social acceptance of the Jim Crow laws of the South as an amoral system.

Your example(s):

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**\*Feminist criticism** – evaluates and interprets works of art with regard to their *portrayal of or influence upon gender roles*. This includes gender bias (portrayal of male/female roles and depictions in works), how cultural norms regarding gender roles are viewed, questioned, or re-enforced. *Example: How women in courtly love stories and romance literature (Arthurian legend, Jane Austen novels) are idealized and the consequences of that idealization for later Western ideas about femininity and relations between the sexes.*

Your example(s):

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**\*Formal criticism** – analyzes a work of literature *in terms of its genre or type*. *Example: The stories of Sherlock Holmes present the traits of the mystery genre (the great detective model) – there is a clear crime that must be solved, clues, the great detective is the only one smart enough to put all the pieces together in time and must explain how he solves the crime to others, there is punishment for the guilty, order is restored to society.*

Your example(s):

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**\*Freudian criticism** – (based on the founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud) views literary *works as expressions of unconscious desires, as wish fulfillments, or neurotic unresolved sexual issues, or unresolved conflicts from childhood*. *Examples: Oedipus unwittingly marries his mother, as an expression of the young male child's competition with his father for his mother's affection.*

Your example(s):

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**\*Historical criticism** – views works of *art as a product of the period in which it was produced*. *Example: Beowulf reflects a society in transition between pagan and Christian beliefs and shows the traits that the Anglo Saxons valued in a hero character (superhuman strength, boastfulness, a band of followers, to immortalize in stories).*

Your example(s):

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**\*Jungian criticism** – explores the presence of in *works of arts of archetypes* – *unconscious images, symbols, associations, or concepts presumed to be a common inheritance of all human beings*. Examples: A king has a crown, sits on a throne, and is a wise, a warrior when needed, and a leader for his country and people.

Your example(s):

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**\*Marxist criticism** – (based on the political philosophies of Karl Marx) interprets *works of art with regard to the material, economic, forces that shape them or with regard to their depictions of social classes*. Example: Examining the rights, privileges, and social expectations of the lower social class Bob Cratchit versus the richer Ebenezer Scrooge in Charles Dickens' **A Christmas Carol**.

Your example(s):

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**\*Mimetic criticism** – (based on the teachings of Aristotle) judges *works as imitations of nature/the real world and evaluates them according to the accuracy of those portrayals*. Example: Which elements/characters in **The Wizard of Oz** are the closest/furthest from the world as we perceive reality? If a character is too fantastic or unrelatable the reader will reject them as reflecting reality.

Your example(s):

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**\*Pragmatic/rhetorical criticism** – interprets or evaluates a *work of art in terms of its effects on an audience*. Example: In the novel **Fahrenheit 451** the main character is forced to question why he burns books and destroys knowledge and comes to recognize that doing so has created a soulless society that he does not mourn when it is destroyed. The reader does not need to experience this problem first hand but rather comes to understand that living in a soulless society is bad for everyone.

Your example(s):

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**\*Reader-response** – views the meaning of a text as resulting from a *relationship between the text itself and the subjective experiences of the reader*. Example: I didn't like my choice nonfiction book because it spent too much time talking about the fair and not enough time talking about the serial killer who stalked people there.

Your example(s):

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**\*Romantic/expressivist criticism** – views works of *art as primarily an expression of the spirit, ideas, beliefs, values, or emotions of its creator*. Example: John Steinbeck included messages about the need for equality for African Americans, the handicapped, and women in his novel **Of Mice and Men** by including characters (Crooks, Lenny, Curley's wife) in the novel that had these traits but are treated unfairly by others.

Your example(s):

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**\*Structuralist criticism** – explores the idea that *meaning in literary works can only come from two part relationships*. Example: Macbeth is caught between only two options in the play, embrace the supernatural (disorder/illusion) and the natural order (reality). This theory goes on to state that we only have reality because of the language systems we have created, without them there would be no meaning to reality as we perceive it.

Your example(s):

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