

Literary Criticism

Literary criticism is an attempt to evaluate and understand the creative writing, the literature of an author. Literature includes plays, essays, novels, poetry, and short stories. Literary criticism is a description, analysis, evaluation, or interpretation of a particular literary work or an author's writings as a whole. Literary criticism is usually expressed in the form of a critical essay. In-depth book reviews are also sometimes viewed as literary criticism.¹

Criticism based on Form

A formalist wants to study the methods and techniques of literary texts. One engaged in this type of criticism has a desire to understand the inner workings of a text, or, as Steven Lynn says, formalists "attend to *how* a work means, not what it means." In other words, formalists study how literature works, not necessarily what literature is about. Another critic, Michael Ryan, points out that for formalists, "art provides access to a different kind of truth than is available to science, a truth that is immune to scientific investigation because it is accessible only through connotative language (allusion, metaphor, symbolism, etc.) and cannot be rendered in the direct, denotative, fact-naming language of the sciences." Important, universal truths cannot be experienced empirically, only alluded to through poetic language.²

A Formalist might start with these questions/tasks: How do form and content work together? How does each little part connect with other little parts and how do they all connect with the whole? And how can these parts connect to reveal a truth, theme, or universal understanding?

Writing Suggestions:

Part One: Reading Closely

Option One: Suggest a Theme...

There are several ways to begin. First, you could begin your analysis with a bold claim about the text's theme. Robert DiYanni explains that a "theme" is a text's "idea or point formulated as a generalization. The theme of a fable is its moral; the theme of a parable is its teaching; the theme of a short story is its implied view of life and conduct." It may help to talk about theme if you use these kinds of verbs: suggest, imply, point out. Use those verbs! "Cisneros suggests... Kafka implies... Morrison points out..." (i.e. "[The author] uses imagery, rhyme, and repetition to suggest that one must lose one's life to gain one's life.")

Option Two: Reveal a Tension, Paradox, Irony, or Reconcilable Ambiguity...

¹ Lamb, Annette and Johnson, Larry. "The Topic: Literary Criticism" Main Page 42explore.com. May, 2003. October 20, 2007. <<http://42explore.com/litcrit.htm>>

² Laga, Barry. "Critical Reading: An Intro to Literary Theory and Criticism." Mesa State College Edusite. 1999. October 20, 2007. <<http://mesastate.edu/~blaga/theoryindex/theoryhomex.html>> N.B. The copious use of this site is with permission via a copyright which states use allowed for non-profit educational purposes with acknowledgement.

Second, you could organize your argument by identifying a fundamental tension, paradox, irony, or ambiguity. Pose and answer questions like... "What elements are in tension in this work? What unity resolves this tension?" Pay particular attention to paradox, irony, unity, complexity, and ambiguity. (i.e. "A core theme in [the text] is the struggle between innocence and knowledge." Or, "The battle between the universal and the particular is resolved in the form of the poem itself.")

No Matter What: Discuss Specific Literary Elements

After you suggest a theme or point out a tension, discuss how the author uses elements like plot, setting, characterization, tone, diction, point of voice, figurative language, imagery, syntax, word choice, rhythm, meter, etc. to create certain effects or achieve the author's apparent goal. For example, talk about plot or narrative structure first by dividing the text into separate parts (i.e. "The poem is divided into four parts. Part one works by indirection... Part two is a kind of transition... Part three offers direct confrontation... Part four resolves the paradox..." etc.)

Whatever you choose to do, make it original and of importance to you. You must include other critical voices that agree, disagree, enhance, illuminate, or in some other way connect to your interpretation. Allow plenty of time for this aspect of your essay as finding the relevant criticism can be a lengthy, yet ultimately rewarding, task. We'll soon discuss the various approaches to citing sources and avoiding plagiarism. This, and the close reading, should be enough to get you started.