



Introduction to Literary Criticism and Analysis

Student Name _____ Date _____

In general terms, **literary criticism** is writing that asks two questions:

- What is good and bad about this text?
- Why is a particular aspect of the text good or bad?

When you were younger, a teacher may have asked you to write a **book review**. Book reviews only have to answer the first question, what is good and bad about this text. Literary criticism goes one step further to ask why.

Literary criticism is very similar to **literary analysis**. Literary analysis asks one main question:

- Why is this text the way it is?
Several common ways of looking at that question more specifically include,
 - Why does this character act the way he or she does?
 - Why does the writer use the particular style he or she uses to convey this text's message?
 - What effect does one aspect of the text, such as the setting or a particular trait of a character, have on other aspects of the story?

When you write literary criticism and literary analysis, you ask a lot of “why” questions. The main difference between the two is that in literary criticism, more of your opinion comes through.

Literary criticism and literary analysis sometimes answer their “why” questions in recognizable ways. Those habitual ways of answering these questions are called different schools of literary theory.

Literary theories are simply different ways of approaching those “why” questions. Some of those approaches include:

- **Reader response theory:** A text is the way it is because of how readers look at it, so any explanation of a text's meaning needs to take into account the ways different people react to the text.
- **New Criticism:** Texts make sense without reference to outside sources. So any question about a text can be answered by looking closely at how different parts of the text relate to each other.
- **Historical/biographical criticism:** Texts are written by authors, who are heavily influenced by the events in their lives and in the world they live in. So any question about a text should be answered by referring to outside information about the life of the author or the history and culture in which the author lived or lives.
- **Feminist or gender criticism:** This kind of criticism looks at the way male and female characters act in a story and analyzes how that behavior reflects the author's cultural context and how those portrayals might affect readers' perceptions of gender. This kind of criticism also looks at what texts leave out; for instance, if there are only stupid men in a story, a gender critic would analyze why.

A sample text:

The rain beat hard against the window, as if heaven was both sad and angry at Lisa, who sat inside, safe and dry, and buried her head in her hands.

A text review (like a book review):

This text describes a girl who is probably sad on a rainy day. It is an effective text at communicating depressing emotions.

A literary criticism:

This text describes two things: rain and a person named Lisa. The text communicates depressing emotions effectively because it applies them not just to a person but to the weather. Lisa buries “her head in her hands,” which may indicate sadness. While rain isn’t strictly speaking sad, its similarity to tears can make it seem so. The author of this text also personifies heaven and gives it the emotions of sadness and anger to explain why it is raining. Having the weather match Lisa’s mood communicates sadness or anger in a realistic way, because when people are sad or angry they are often so emotional that they cannot see the world as anything but an extension of those emotions.

A literary analysis:

This text describes two things: rain and a person named Lisa. It describes them both in a depressing way. The text uses personification of nature, because it gives nature the emotions “sad and angry” to explain why it is raining. Giving nature human emotions can make it seem that nature matches or even sympathizes with the person in the scene, who puts her head down in her hands, a sign that she could be sad or angry too.

Note that all three texts start with a quick summary of the text they are writing about.

Note also that both the literary criticism and literary analysis shown here are primarily New Criticism, because for the most part they rely just on the text—as well as a few literary terms—to make their points.

A historical/biographical literary analysis of this text might indicate the following:

It was raining heavily outside when the author wrote this text, and that might have helped her think of rain as a parallel for Lisa’s emotions.

****Be careful to provide cited evidence from a source for the facts you use in historical/biographical literary criticism and analysis.**