

Literary Criticism: An Overview of Approaches

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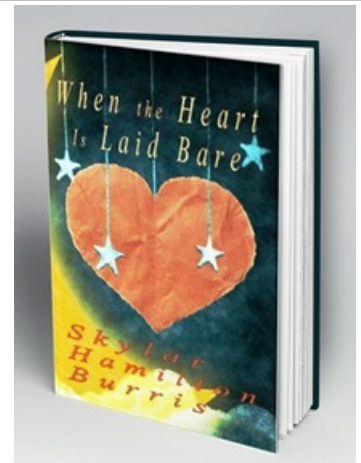
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The Purpose of Criticism:

Literary criticism has at least three primary purposes.

(1) To help us resolve a question, problem, or difficulty in the reading.

The historical approach, for instance, might be helpful in addressing a problem in Thomas Otway's play *Venice Preserv'd*. Why are the conspirators, despite the horrible, bloody details of their obviously brutish plan, portrayed in a sympathetic light? If we look at the author and his time, we see that he was a Tory whose play was performed in the wake of the Popish Plot and the Exclusion Bill Crisis, and that there are obvious similarities between the Conspiracy in the play and the Popish Plot in history. The Tories would never approve of the bloody Popish Plot, but they nonetheless sympathized with the plotters for the way they were abused by the Tory enemy, the Whigs. Thus it makes sense for Otway to condemn the conspiracy itself in *Vencie Preserv'd* without condemning the conspirators themselves.

(2) To help us decide which is the better of two conflicting readings.

A formalist approach might enable us to choose between a reading which sees the dissolution of society in *Lord of the Flies* as being caused by too strict a suppression of the "bestial" side of man and one which sees it as resulting from too little suppression. We can look to the text and ask: What textual evidence is there for the suppression or indulgence of the "bestial" side of man? Does Ralph suppress Jack when he tries to indulge his bestial side in hunting? Does it appear from the text that an imposition of stricter law and order would have prevented the breakdown? Did it work in the "grownup" world of the novel?

(3) To enable us to form judgments about literature.

One of the purposes of criticism is to judge if a work is any good or not. For instance, we might use a formalist approach to argue that a John Donne poem is of high quality because it contains numerous intricate conceits that are well sustained. Or, we might use the mimetic approach to argue that *The West Indian* is a poor play because it fails to paint a realistic picture of the world.

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Historical / Biographical Approach:

Definition:

Historical / Biographical critics see works as the reflection of an author's life and times (or of the characters' life and times). They believe it is necessary to know about the author and the political, economical, and sociological context of his times in order to truly understand his works.

Advantages:

This approach works well for some works--like those of Alexander Pope, John Dryden, and Milton--which are obviously political in nature. One must know Milton was blind, for instance, for "On His Blindness" to have any meaning. And one must know something about the Exclusion Bill Crisis to appreciate John Dryden's "Absalom and Achitophel." It also is necessary to take a historical approach in order to place allusions in there proper classical, political, or biblical background.

Disadvantages:

New Critics refer to the historical / biographical critic's belief that the meaning or value of a work may be determined by the author's intention as "the intentional fallacy." They believe that this approach tends to reduce art to the level of biography and make it relative (to the times) rather than universal.

Sample Papers:

[The Ideal Source for a Tory Message: Thomas Otway's Venice Preserv'd](#)
[Motivation in Sandra Cisneros's "Never Marry a Mexican"](#)

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Moral / Philosophical Approach:

Definition:

Moral / philosophical critics believe that the larger purpose of literature is to teach morality and to probe philosophical issues.

Practitioners:

Matthew Arnold -- argued works must have "high seriousness"
Plato -- insisted literature must exhibit moralism and utilitarianism
Horace - felt literature should be "delightful and instructive"

Advantages:

This approach is useful for such works as Alexander Pope's "An Essay on Man," which does present an obvious moral philosophy. It is also useful when considering the themes of works (for example, man's inhumanity to man in Mark Twain's [Huckleberry Finn](#)). Finally, it does not view literature merely as "art" isolated from all moral implications; it recognizes that literature can affect readers, whether subtly or directly, and that the message of a work--and not just the decorous vehicle for that message--is important.

Disadvantages:

Detractors argue that such an approach can be too "judgmental." Some believe literature should be judged primarily (if not solely) on its artistic merits, not its moral or philosophical content.

See Also:

Read my [introduction](#) to this book for a justification of a Christian critical approach to literature.

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Mimetic Approach:

Definition:

This can be closely related to the moral / philosophical approach, but is somewhat broader. Mimetic critics ask how well the work of literature accords with the real world. Is it accurate? Is it correct? Is it moral? Does it show how people really act? As such, mimetic criticism can include some forms of moral / philosophical criticism, psychological criticism, and feminist criticism.

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Formalism / New Criticism

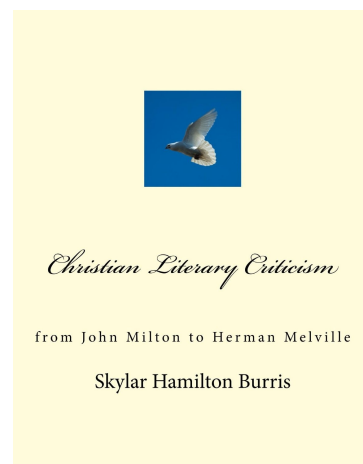
A formalistic approach to literature, once called New Criticism, involves a close reading of the text. Famous formalistic critics include I.A. Richards, Robert Penn Warren, Cleanth Brooks, and Allen Tate, to name but a few. Formalists believe that all information essential to the interpretation of a work must be found within the work itself; there is no need to bring in outside information about the history, politics, or society of the time, or about the author's life.

Those who practice formalism claim they do not view works through the lens of feminism, psychology, Marxism, or any other philosophical standpoint. They are also uninterested in the work's affect on the reader. Formalistic critics spend a great deal of time analyzing irony, paradox, imagery, and metaphor. They are also interested in a work's setting, characters, symbols, and point of view.

Terms Used in Formalism

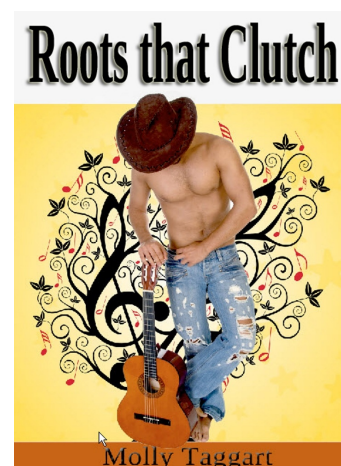
When reading the literary analysis of a New Critic, you might come across the following terms:

1. Tension. Tension is the integral unity of the work and often involves irony or paradox.



from John Milton to Herman Melville

Skylar Hamilton Burris



Molly Taggart

2. Intentional fallacy. Formalistic critics refer to the belief that the meaning of a work may be determined by the author's intention as "the intentional fallacy."

3. Affective fallacy. In New Criticism, the belief that the meaning or value of a work may be determined by its affect on the reader

4. External form. The external form is the outer trappings of a work. For example, in a poem, the external form would include the rhyme scheme, meter, and stanza form.

5. Objective correlative. Originated by T.S. Eliot, this term refers to a collection of objects, situations, or events that immediately evoke a specific emotion.

Advantages and Disadvantages of New Criticism

The advantages to this critical approach is that it can be performed without much research, and it emphasizes the value of literature apart from its context. This type of literary criticism in effect makes literature timeless. Unfortunately, there are also disadvantages to this approach. For one, the text is viewed in isolation. Formalism ignores the context of the work. This means that, among other things, it cannot account for allusions. Some have argued that the formalist approach reduces literature to nothing more than a collection of rhetorical devices.

An Example of Formalism

A formalistic approach to the short story "Silence of the Llano" by Rudolfo Anaya might force us to see the incestuous relationship that is established at the end of the story as a positive alternative to loneliness. If we were to take into account external things, such as morality, we could not help but be horrified at such a conclusion. But in studying the symbols, setting, and structure of "The Silence of the Llano," we get an opposite picture.

The setting of the llano, its isolation and desolation, make its loneliness the primary evil of the story, in contrast to the town where people can escape the loneliness, where Rafael can find love, and where men can talk. The only way to survive the llano is to make it more like the town--to fill it with love and words and anything to escape the loneliness. "Words" are positively contrasted to "silence," as is "winter" to "spring" and "growth" to "death." The silence of the llano is constantly referred to, and Rafael's parents die in winter. But when Rafael marries, his wife makes a garden to grow in the desolate llano, and he can hear her voice. When Rafael establishes the incestuous relationship at the close of the story, he finally speaks to his daughter, and words break the long silence. He tells her that the "spring is the time for the garden. I will turn the earth for you. The seeds will grow." (182). Growth, spring, and words--the primary symbols which are positively contrasted to death, winter, and silence--are all combined in the close.

This formalistic approach does not allow us to account for most readers' natural (and appropriate) response of disgust to the incestuous relationship or to examine how that affects the ability of the author to communicate his story. Some would argue that an understanding of the text is where criticism should begin, and not where it ends. We should also relate the text to life, ideas, and morality.

Sample Papers:

[Sound in William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*](#)

[A Formalist Reading of Sandra Cisneros's "Woman Hollering Creek"](#)

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Psychological Approach

Definition:

Psychological critics view works through the lens of psychology. They look either at the psychological motivations of the characters or of the authors themselves, although the former is generally considered a more respectable approach. Most frequently, psychological critics apply Freudian psychology to works, but other approaches (such as a Jungian approach) also exist.

Freudian Approach:

A Freudian approach often includes pinpointing the influences of a character's **id** (the instinctual, pleasure seeking part of the mind), **superego** (the part of the mind that represses the id's impulses) and the **ego** (the part of the mind that controls but does not repress the id's impulses, releasing them in a healthy way). Freudian critics like to point out the sexual implications of symbols and imagery, since Freud's believed that all human behavior is motivated by sexuality. They tend to see **concave** images, such as ponds, flowers, cups, and caves as female symbols; whereas objects that are longer than they are wide are usually seen as **phallic symbols**. Dancing, riding, and flying are associated with sexual pleasure. Water is usually associated with birth, the female principle, the maternal, the womb, and the death wish. Freudian critics occasionally discern the presence of an **Oedipus complex** (a boy's unconscious rivalry with his father for the love of his mother) in the male characters of certain works, such as Hamlet. They may also refer to Freud's psychology of child development, which includes the **oral stage**, the **anal stage**, and the **genital stage**.

Jungian Approach:

Jung is also an influential force in myth (archetypal) criticism. Psychological critics are generally concerned with his concept of the process of **individuation** (the process of discovering what makes one different from everyone else). Jung labeled three parts of the self: the **shadow**, or the darker, unconscious self (usually the villain in literature); the **persona**, or a man's social personality (usually the hero); and the **anima**, or a man's "soul image" (usually the heroine). A **neurosis** occurs when someone fails to assimilate one of these unconscious components into his conscious and **projects** it on someone else. The persona must be flexible and be able to balance the components of the psyche.

Practitioners:

Ernest Jones, Otto Rank, Marie Boaparte, and others

Advantages:

It can be a useful tool for understanding some works, such as Henry James *The Turning of the Screw*, in which characters obviously have psychological issues. Like the biographical approach, knowing something about a writer's psychological make up can give us insight into his work.

Disadvantages:

Psychological criticism can turn a work into little more than a psychological case study, neglecting to view it as a piece of art. Critics sometimes attempt to diagnose long dead authors based on their works, which is perhaps not the best evidence of their psychology. Critics tend to see sex in everything, exaggerating this aspect of literature. Finally, some works do not lend themselves readily to this approach.

Examples:

(1) A psychological approach to John Milton's *Samson Agonisties* might suggest that the shorning of Samson's locks is symbolic of his castration at the hands of Dalila and that the fighting words he exchanges with Harapha constitute a reassertion of his manhood. Psychological critics might see Samson's bondage as a symbol of his sexual impotency, and his destruction of the Philistine temple and the killing of himself and many others as a final orgasmic event (since death and sex are often closely associated in Freudian psychology). The total absence of Samson's mother in *Samson Agonisties* would make it difficult to argue anything regarding the Oedipus complex, but Samson's refusal to be cared for by his father and his remorse over failing to rule Dalila may be seen as indicative of his own fears regarding his sexuality.

(2) A psychological approach to "The Silence of the Llano" would allow us to look into the motivations of Rafael--it would allow us to examine the effects of isolation and loneliness on his character and provide some reasoning for why he might chose to establish an incestuous relationship with his daughter. A specifically Freudian approach will tune us in to the relevant symbolism which will enable us to better understand the conclusion. For instance, with such a mind frame, we can immediately recognize that Rafael's statement to his daughter "I will turn the earth for you. The seeds will grow" is the establishment of a sexual relationship that will result in children. We can see the water in which she bathes as symbolic of that birth that is to come.

Sample Paper:

[A Freudian Approach to Erin McGraw's "A Thief"](#)

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Mythological / Archetypal / Symbolic

Note: "Symbolic" approaches may also fall under the category of formalism because they involve a close reading of the text. Myth criticism generally has broader, more universal applications than symbolic criticism, although both assume that certain images have a fairly universal affect on readers.

Definition:

A mythological / archetypal approach to literature assumes that there is a collection of symbols, images, characters, and motifs (i.e. **archetypes**) that evokes basically the same response in all people. According to the psychologist Carl **Jung**, mankind possesses a "**collective unconscious**" that contains these archetypes and that is common to all of humanity. Myth critics identify these archetypal patterns and discuss how they function in the works. They believe that these archetypes are the source of much of literature's power.

Some Archetypes (See [A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature](#) for a complete list):

- archetypal women - the Good Mother, the Terrible Mother, and the Soul Mate (such as the Virgin Mary)
- water - creation, birth-death-resurrection, purification, redemption, fertility, growth
- garden - paradise (Eden), innocence, fertility
- desert - spiritual emptiness, death, hopelessness
- red - blood, sacrifice, passion, disorder

- green - growth, fertility
- black - chaos, death, evil
- serpent - evil, sensuality, mystery, wisdom, destruction
- seven - perfection
- shadow, persona, and anima (see [psychological criticism](#))
- hero archetype - The hero is involved in a **quest** (in which he overcomes obstacles). He experiences **initiation** (involving a separation, transformation, and return), and finally he serves as a **scapegoat**, that is, he dies to atone.

Practitioners:

Maud Bodkin, Bettina L. Knapp, and others.

Advantages:

Provides a universalistic approach to literature and identifies a reason why certain literature may survive the test of time. It works well with works that are highly symbolic.

Disadvantages:

Literature may become little more than a vehicle for archetypes, and this approach may ignore the "art" of literature.

Examples:

(1) In *Go Down, Moses* by William Faulkner, for example, we might view Isaac McCaslin's repudiation of the land as an attempt to deny the existence of his archetypal shadow--that dark part of him that maintains some degree of complicity in slavery. When he sees the granddaughter of Jim, and can barely tell she is black, his horrified reaction to the miscegenation of the races may be indicative of his shadow's (his deeply racist dark side's) emergence.

(2) In Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, Fedallah can be seen as Ahab's shadow, his defiant pagan side wholly unrestrained. Numerous archetypes appear in *Moby Dick*. The sea is associated both with spiritual mystery (Ahab is ultimately on a spiritual quest to defy God because evil exists) and with death and rebirth (all but Ishmael die at sea, but Ahab's death as if crucified is suggestive of rebirth). Three is symbolic of spiritual awareness; thus we see numerous triads in *Moby Dick*, including Ahab's three mysterious crew members and the three harpooners.

(3) In "The Silence of the Llano" by Rudolfo Anaya, a mythological / archetypal approach would allow us to examine the archetypes that illicit similar reactions in most readers. We can see how Anaya is drawing on the archetype of water to imply purification (when Rita bathes after her period) and fertility and growth (when Rita washes before the incestuous relationship is established). The red blood Rita washes away calls up visions of violent passions, which will be evidenced in the rape. The garden conjures up images of innocence, unspoiled beauty, and fertility. Thus, the reader can sense in the end that a state of innocence has been regained and that growth will ensue. This approach, however, is limited in that by assuming it, the critic may begin to view the story not as a work within itself, but merely as a vessel for transmitting these archetypes. He may also overlook the possibility that some symbols are not associated with their archetype; for instance, the sun, which normally implies the passage of time, seems in its intensity in the llano to actually suggest a slowing down of time, a near static state in the llano.

Sample Paper:

[A Catalogue of Symbols in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*](#)

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Feminist Approach

Definition:

Feminist criticism is concerned with the impact of gender on writing and reading. It usually begins with a critique of patriarchal culture. It is concerned with the place of female writers in the canon. Finally, it includes a search for a feminine theory or approach to texts. Feminist criticism is political and often revisionist. Feminists often argue that male fears are portrayed through female characters. They may argue that gender determines everything, or just the opposite: that all gender differences are imposed by society, and gender determines nothing.

Elaine Showalter's Theory:

In [A Literature of Their Own](#), Elaine Showalter argued that literary subcultures all go through three major phases of development. For literature by or about women, she labels these stages the Feminine, Feminist, and Female:

- (1) **Feminine Stage** - involves "*imitation* of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition" and "*internalization* of its standards."
- (2) **Feminist Stage** - involves "*protest* against these standards and values and *advocacy* of minority rights...."

(3) **Female Stage** - this is the "phase of *self-discovery*, a turning inwards freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity."

Practitioners:

Ellen Mores, Sandra Gilbert, Elaine Showalter, Nina Baym, etc.

Advantages:

Women have been somewhat underrepresented in the traditional canon, and a feminist approach to literature redresses this problem.

Disadvantages:

Feminist turn literary criticism into a political battlefield and overlook the merits of works they consider "patriarchal." When arguing for a distinct feminine writing style, they tend to relegate women's literature to a ghetto status; this in turn prevents female literature from being naturally included in the literary canon. The feminist approach is often too theoretical.

Example One:

Showalter's three stages of feminine, feminist, and female are identifiable in the life of Cleófilas in Sandra Cisneros's "Woman Hollering Creek."

Cleófilas begins to internalize the paternalistic values of the society in which she lives at least as early as the ice house scene. She "accompanies her husband," as is expected of her (48). Since women should be seen and not heard in a paternalistic society, she "sits mute beside their conversation" (48). She goes through all of the motions that are expected of her, laughing "at the appropriate moments" (48). She submits, if unhappily, to the rule of her husband, "this man, this father, this rival, this keeper, this lord, this master, this husband till kingdom come" (49).

Yet Cleófilas gradually begins to emerge from the feminine stage into the feminist stage, where she begins to revolt and advocate for her own rights. It begins with "[a] doubt. Slender as a hair" (50). When she returns from the hospital with her new son, something seems different. "No. Her imagination. The house was the same as always. Nothing" (50). This is true because the house is not different; it is Cleófilas who has begun to change. Perhaps giving birth to a child has made her aware of the power and importance women possess. She begins to think of returning home, but is not ready for the possibility yet. It would be "a disgrace" (50). She begins to internally protest against the society, thinking about the town "with its silly pride for a bronze pecan" and the fact that there is "nothing, nothing, nothing of interest" (50). The patriarchal society, with its ice house, city hall, liquor stores, and bail bonds is of no interest to her. She is upset that the town is built so that "you have to depend on husbands" (51). Though her husband says she is "exaggerating," she seems to be becoming convinced that her society is a bad one, where men kill their wives with impunity. "It seemed the newspapers were full of such stories. This woman found on the side of the interstate. This one pushed from a moving car . . ." (52). Although she does nothing when he throws a book at her, Cleófilas does (if only meekly) insist that he take her to the doctor. And there she solidifies her internal rebellion with actions: she leaves her husband with Felice to return to Mexico.

Felice is actually more representative of the third, female, stage than Cleófilas, but the fact that Cleófilas enjoys her company suggests that when she returns to Mexico, she *may* seek to enter that third stage herself. Felice is not phalocentric--she is not interested in revolting against men, she simply does not need them. She doesn't have a husband and she owns her own car. "The pickup was hers. She herself had chosen it. She herself was paying for it" (55). Felice is most likely a part of a community of women; she is certainly friends with the nurse Graciela. Cleófilas is attracted to Felice, who "was like no woman she'd ever met" (55). At home, in Mexico, Cleófilas recounts the story of Felice's yelling when they crossed the creek. "Just like that. Who would've thought?" (56). Cleófilas seems to have enjoyed her company and has kept the experience in her mind. Felice's laughter, "gurgling out of her own throat, a long ribbon of laughter, like water" suggests that Felice had completed the self-discovery stage. (Water is often symbolic of rebirth.) Cleófilas has witnessed the third stage in Felice, and it is up to her whether she will enter it or regress to the feminine stage and internalize the paternalistic values of her father and brothers with whom she is now living.

Example Two:

If a critic were to take into account external historical and social considerations when interpreting Sandra Cisneros's "Woman Hollering Creek," his initial natural prejudice might be to view the modern United States as a likelier place for a woman to find liberation from oppressive masculinity than Mexico. However, a formalist reading of "Woman Hollering Creek" reveals that, in this story at least, just the opposite is true. The United States town to which Cleofilas moves with her new husband casts a distorted mirror image of the town from whence she came. This juxtaposition in the setting, as well as the characters, symbols, and point of view, all combine to amass their weight toward one conclusion: life in the United States is less liberating for the Mexican woman than life in Mexico.

That the United States town is steeped in masculinity to the exclusion of femininity is evidenced by the symbolism of the setting as well as by the characters. The town is North of Cle³filas's home town; it is upward (erect), implying masculinity. The primary character that takes an *active* part in Cle³filas's life, her husband, is masculine. Across the street is Maximiliano, so macho that he "was said to have killed his wife in an ice-house brawl" (51). There is no feminine identity for Cleofilas to relate to in her neighbors; Dolores is no longer a mother and Soledad is no longer a wife. Dolores's garden, rather than being tranquil and feminine, serves to reinforce masculine dominance; the "red red cockscombs, fringed and bleeding a thick menstrual color" (47) foreshadow the abuse that

would soon leave Cleofilas's lip split open so that it "bled an orchid of blood" (47). The town has a city hall, an image of masculine rule, outside of which rests a large bronze pecan. In effect, it is a brass nut, an obviously masculine symbol for which the town possesses a "silly pride" (50).

Each of these components of setting and character have their feminine mirror in the Mexican town, which is therefore more hospitable to women. The town is South, suggesting the nether regions and therefore femininity. The primary character who takes a part in Cleofilas's life there is her father, who is more feminine than masculine, who seems to have taken over the mothering role of Cleofilas's deceased mother, making what sounds like a mother's promise: "I am your father [read mother], I will never abandon you" (43). All of her neighbors are women, and all have a sense of identity. There are "aunts," and an aunt is someone with both a sibling and a niece or nephew; there are "godmothers," and a godmother is both someone's friend and someone's protector; and there is Chela, a "girlfriend," a woman whose identity is based upon a friendship with Cleofilas, a friendship in which they can relate to one another and share [dreams](#) (44). Instead of a city hall, the town has a town center, which implies not masculine competition and rule but feminine cooperation. Instead of a bronze pecan outside of the city hall, there is a "leafy zocalo in the center of town" (50), suggesting fertility and therefore femininity.

In addition to providing a contrast between the feminine and the masculine, the relative settings of the towns also create a contrast between independence and dependence, "because the towns [in the U.S.] are built so that you have to depend on husbands" (50-51). Whereas in Mexico Cleofilas is within walking distance of the cinema, her friend's house, the church, the town center, and her family, in the United States, there is "nothing, nothing nothing of interest. Nothing one could walk to, at any rate" (50). Cleofilas's only social outings are with her husband, to the ice house, which takes the place of the church in the northern town. In the church in Mexico she could meet with other women and engage in "huddled whispering," but in the United States "the whispering begins at sunset at the ice house instead" and she must sit "mute beside their conversation" (48). TV and cinema are both readily available to Cleofilas in the southern town, but in the northern town she has no TV, and can only glimpse a "few episodes" of her telenovela at Soledad's house. Even her one solid contact with a world outside her own, "*her* book" is thrown by her husband "[f]rom across the room" (52).

Not only does the Mexican town provide more opportunities for independent action than the U.S. town, but it also provides alternatives (other than a mere husband) for dependency. In Mexico, Cleofilas can depend on her father, brothers, aunts, and godmothers. In the United States, however, she has no such option; as the doctor says, "her family's all in Mexico" (54). In the Mexican town, she can depend on God; but in the U.S. town, the ice house has taken the place of the church, and so men have taken the place of God. And finally, in Mexico she can depend on community. The town center implies a network of support. The city hall in the U.S., however, implies indifference or at least distance.

These contrasts between the dependence on the masculine necessitated by the U.S. town and the independence (or at least the variety of dependencies) afforded by the Mexican town become more clear as the story progresses. Initially, the narrator's point of view expresses a feeling of limitation in the Mexican town:

In the town where she grew up, there isn't very much to do except accompany the aunts and godmothers to the house of one or the other to play cards. Or walk to the cinema to see this week's film again, speckled and with one hair quivering annoyingly on the screen. Or to the center of town to order a milk shake that will appear in a day and a half as a pimple on her backside. Or to the girlfriend's house to watch the latest telenovela episode and try to copy the way the women comb their hair, wear their makeup (44).

The language of this passage makes the town appear dull and limiting until it is compared with the language of a similar passage describing the northern town:

There is no place to go. Unless one counts the neighbor ladies. Soledad on one side, Dolores on the other. Or the creek (51).

By contrasting these passages, we can see the narrator's *true* point of view. The Mexican town is not limited compared to the United States town. There are a variety of options. There is nothing to do "except . . . Or . . . Or . . . Or . . ." In contrast, in the United States town, there is nothing to do "Unless . . . Or." Variety is evidence by the three repetitions of "or" in the southern town versus the single "or" in the northern town. Furthermore, "except" implies something like "well, there is an exception to my statement that there is nothing to do" whereas "unless" implies "well, you could consider this as an option, but why would you want to?"

Finally, the narrator's point of view becomes abundantly clear as Cleofilas crosses Woman Hollering Creek on her way home to Mexico. Again, initially, the narrator's point of view is negative. When moving to her new home with her husband, Cleofilas wants to know whether "the woman has hollered from anger or pain" (46). And indeed, crossing that river to her new home is like crossing into a world of both anger and pain. But leaving that world, and crossing the river in order to ultimately return to Mexico, gives Cleofilas a new perspective. Her companion hollers when they cross the river, but not in either anger or pain. She hollers "like Tarzan" (55). Cleofilas, the narrator tells us, had expected "pain or rage, perhaps, but not a hoot like the one Felice had just let go" (56). Thus, "Woman Hollering Creek," when crossing it means returning to Mexico, becomes not angry or painful, but liberating.

A vast amount of internal evidence in "Woman Hollering Creek" (the setting, symbolism, and characters) points to the fact that Cleofilas's final return to Mexico is liberating. In the masculine town of the United States, she has no option but to submit to the male domineering of her husband. In the feminine town of Mexico, however, she has a variety of dependency options as well as opportunities for independence. And finally, these facts are confirmed by a shift in the narrator's point of view, which clarifies the positive aspects of the Mexican town.

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Reader Response Criticism

What is Reader Response Criticism?

Reader response criticism places strong emphasis on the reader's role in producing the meaning of a literary work. It is in some senses an opposite approach from that of formalism. Whereas formalists treat meaning as objectively inherent in the text, in reader response criticism, the text has no meaning until it is read by a reader who creates the meaning. Unlike the formalistic critical approach, this type of literary criticism insists that works are not universal, that is, that they will not always mean more or less the same thing to readers everywhere. Indeed, according to one practitioner of reader response criticism, Norman Holland, the reader imposes his or her own identity on the work, "to a large extent recreating that text in the reader's image."

What Are the Advantages and Disadvantages of Reader Response Criticism?

Reader response criticism acknowledges that different people view works differently and that interpretations change over time. However, it also tends to make interpretation highly subjective and consequently does not provide sufficient criteria for judging between two or more different interpretations of the text. Reader response criticism has been used by literary critics ranging from I.A. Richards and Louise Rosenblatt to Walter Gibson and Norman Holland.

An Example of Reader Response Criticism

In reading the parable of the prodigal son in the New Testament, different readers are likely to have different responses. Someone who has lived a fairly straight and narrow life and who does not feel like he has been rewarded for it is likely to associate with the older brother of the parable and sympathize with his opposition to the celebration over the prodigal son's return. Someone with a more checkered past would probably approach the parable with more sympathy for the younger brother. A parent who had had difficulties with a rebellious child would probably focus on the father, and, depending on his or her experience, might see the father's unconditional acceptance of the prodigal as either good and merciful or as unwise and overindulgent. While the parable might disturb some, it could elicit a feeling of relief from others.

When using reader response criticism as a tool of analysis, you could write about how the author evokes a particular reaction in you as the reader, what features of your own identity influence you in creating your interpretation, and how another reader in a different situation might interpret the work differently.

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Miscellaneous

Aristotle (Augustine) - reality in concrete substance vs. **Plato (Aquinas)** - reality in abstract ideal forms

dramatic unities - rules governing classical dramas requiring the unity of action, time, and place (The idea was based on a Renaissance misinterpretation of passages in Aristotle's *Poetic*.)

pathetic fallacy - Ruskin - attributing human traits to nonhuman objects

fancy - Coleridge -- combining several known properties into new combinations

imagination - using known properties to create a whole that is entirely new

Pater: Aesthetic experience permits the greatest intensification of each moment - "Of such wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for its own sake, has most."

Longinus: emphasis on greatness of sentiments - the sublime

Goethe: "The poet makes himself a seer by a long, prodigious, and rational disordering of all the senses."

Howells: "Our novelists..concern themselves with the more smiling aspect of life, which are the more American." also "When man is at his very best, he is a sort of low grade nickel-plated angel."

Morris: "Art was once the common possession of the whole people..today..art is only enjoyed...by comparatively few persons...the rich and the parasites that minister to them."

Sweetness and Light: Delight and Instruction (in reference to the Ancients)

Newman: "I say that a cultivated intellect, because it is a good in itself, brings with it a power and a grace to every work."

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Other Approaches

Structuralism: Structuralists view literature as a system of signs. They try to make plain the organizational codes

that they believe regulate all literature. The most famous practitioner is **Michael Foucault**.

Deconstruction: This approach assumes that language does not refer to any external reality. It can assert several, contradictory interpretations of one text. Deconstructionists make interpretations based on the political or social implications of language rather than examining an author's intention. **Jacques Derrida** was the founder of this school of criticism.

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Sources and Further Reading

Burris, Skylar Hamilton. [Christian Literary Criticism](#)

This book contains essays that take a moral, philosophical, historical, biographical, and formalist approach to literature. An introduction justifies a Christian literary approach, and several essays explore writings from Milton to Melville.

Guerin, Wilfred L., et al. [A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature](#). Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992.

This resource is a superb overview of the major schools of literary criticism. After providing a history and explanation of each method, Guerin provides multiple applications to works of literature. The handbook is thorough, but not overly technical.

[Encyclopedia of Literature](#). Phillipines: Merriam-Webster, 1995.

Merriam-Webster's encyclopedia is one of the most affordable literature references on the market. Although it can not be completely exhaustive, the encyclopedia provides entries on most major works and authors, as well as literary terms. Entries are available for the major schools of criticism. Numerous pictures are included.

[How to Master the Literature GRE](#)

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