

# Ways to analyze / critique / evaluate a literary work

When you write about a piece of literature, **you can use any combination of critical approaches you want**, unless your instructor asks for a specific critical approach. Make any connections that interest you and that you can find evidence to support.

A **New Historical analysis** looks at how a piece reflects or responds to the history of its time OR uses the piece to help illuminate the history of its time.

**New Criticism or Formalist criticism** seeks to break the piece into its **literary components** and **evaluate it** in terms of how successful it is as a piece of literature. It may evaluate whether a piece deserves to be in the **canon**.

A critical piece might **combine** pure literary analysis (like a **New Critic**) along with some moral judgment (like an **ethical critic**).

**Ethical criticism** analyzes and evaluates the piece *along a critic's moral spectrum*: good vs. evil, women's rights (feminism), African American rights, workers' rights (Marxism), religion, gay rights, colonized peoples' rights, libertarianism, capitalism, Christi-anity, Catholicism, etc. (You can bring just about any personal moral view – or *ethic* – to bear in analyzing the creative piece.)

A **deconstructive approach** analyzes the language of the piece, often at the level of particular words, looking for pattern or meaning. (To aid in this, **digital studies** might use computers to count the occurrence of certain words across a work or an entire genre.) Both are related to **linguistics**.

A piece of literature is written by an author and published. If we're reading it, we can assume it was regarded fairly highly by enough people that someone decided to include it in our coursework today. It has whatever content the author put it in it, and perhaps some changes an editor made to it. There is usually no literary criticism of this piece in this piece.

A critic might apply any critical style to **examine the interesting relationship between these two creative pieces** (or any other two).

A **psychoanalytic critique** of the piece might explore the psychological motivation of the characters, or it might analyze the author's psychological motivations, often by relating the piece to the author's own life.

**Archetypal criticism** analyzes a piece for its familiar elements (the witch, the hero, the rascal, the poison apple, etc.) and patterns (comedy, tragedy, etc.). It draws on traditions from myths and storytelling repeated across many cultures.

A **reader response** piece discusses what the piece means to the reader, who often relates it to his or her own life experience. Or, it could be a more scholarly analysis of what a number of different readers thought as they read the piece.

**Another creative piece** is sometimes inspired by the first piece. Maybe the author disagreed with the first author, or thought he or she could do better, or simply wanted to play with the idea a little more – perhaps focus on a different character, change the theme, update the setting, etc.

This is by no means an exhaustive list of critical approaches. Refer to other resources for more examples of critical styles.