

Why is it important to recognize critical approaches?

As J. Hawthorn explains, the categorization of a particular critic's approach can be useful as "a basis to assess the force of the critic's comments on a particular work" (*Studying the Novel*, 134). He provides the following illustrative example about Robert F. Haugh's view on Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* (published in 1899):

[*Heart of Darkness* narrates the experience of Englishman Charlie Marlow as a river-boat captain, employed by a Belgian trading company, on a difficult voyage up an unnamed river in Africa to collect ivory and a mysterious agent of the company, Kurtz]  
[Haugh's essay is reprinted in The Norton Critical Edition of Conrad's novella]

"The essay pours some scorn on the argument that Conrad's novella is a critique of Belgian imperialism, suggesting that this reveals a superficial understanding of the work and concludes by arguing that the Conradian hero (such as Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*) 'in his remarkable actions . . . defines the mortal condition, and in his last moment of vision . . . sees all the scheme of the universe; and we share it in a moment of tragic exaltation (Conrad 1971, 163).

Let us imagine that you are writing an essay on *Heart of Darkness*, and in the course of your argument you state that Conrad's novella is not primarily a critique of Belgian imperialism but represents a tragic view of the mortal condition, and you quote from Haugh's chapter to back up your argument. What is problematic about this is that it does not assess Haugh's arguments in the light of the fact that his book is published in the United States at a time (1957) when because of the dominance of New Critical ideas it was extremely fashionable to play down the extent to which works of literature engaged with specific socio-political situations or events, and to argue that 'great' literature draw our attention rather to the human condition in general. This does not mean that we can just dismiss Haugh's arguments out of hand, but it does mean that they have to be assessed in the light of Haugh's apparent critical beliefs and of the time at which he wrote. If you want to strengthen the force of your argument you need other substantiating material: the views of critics who have taken a different view of *Heart of Darkness*, quotations from Conrad himself – close analytical attention to the literary text itself.

Being able to categorize critical approaches should not mean that one prejudges the worth or the relevance of a book or an article, but it does help in assessing the force of a given critic's argument." (*Studying the Novel*, 134)

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### A chronology of critical approaches

- Traditional approaches: moral, philosophical, generic,  
19<sup>th</sup> century historical and biographical criticism  
1900- Psychanalytic approaches (Freud)  
c. 1910 - Myth and archetypal criticism (Jung; Bodkin 1934, Frye 1951, 1957)  
c. 1910-1930 Russian formalism (Shklovsky, Propp, Jakobson, Bakhtin)  
c. 1930- Marxist approaches (Lukács, Benjamin, Adorno; Althusser, Macherey 1966)  
c. 1930-1960 New Criticism  
c. 1960 - Structuralism (Greimas, Jakobson, Barthes)  
Feminist approaches (Gilbert and Gubar 1979, Showalter 1979)  
Poststructuralism, deconstruction (Derrida 1967, Barthes)  
c. 1970- Reader-oriented approaches (Fish, Iser, Culler, Holland)  
Postcolonial (Said 1978)

- c. 1980- New Historicism, Cultural materialism
- c. 1990- Ecocriticism

Maps of critical approaches

HAWTHORN (*Studying the novel*)

**Textual** approaches: they concentrate on the actual words of the work rather than bringing *extrinsic* information into their criticism

- Russian formalism
- New Criticism
- Structuralism, Narratology
- post-structuralism and deconstruction

**Contextual** approaches:

Sociological approaches:

“the context of the author’s own society and his or her position within it, both as an individual (a member of a particular social group or class) and as an author (a member of a literary group, relying on certain publishers, libraries, readers, and so on)” (p. 138)

Cultural materialism and New Historicism

Postcolonial theory

Generic approaches: genre = a type or kind of literature, “it is a sort of context: it helps us to understand the aims of a writer and the expectations of readers, to recognize conventional elements as well as divergences from what is conventional” (141)

Biographical approaches

Psychological and psychoanalytic approaches

**Ideological** approaches: they “carry with them an overt and conscious commitment to ideas, values, systems of belief that generally have a wider scope than the purely literary” (p. 143)

Marxist approaches

Feminist approaches

Queer theory

KLARER (*An Introduction to Literary Studies*)

Classification depending on the main focus of the major methodologies (p. 73)

**Text**

- philology
- rhetoric
- formalism and structuralism
- new criticism
- semiotics and deconstruction

**Author**

- biographical criticism
- psychoanalytic criticism
- phenomenology

**Reader**

- reception theory
- reception history
- reader-response criticism

**Context**

literary history  
Marxist literary theory  
feminist literary theory  
new historicism and cultural studies