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# Literary Criticism

# LITERARY CRITICISM

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**Tahta Media Group**

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## LITERARY CRITICISM

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## FOREWORD

This module, "Literary Criticism," is designed to introduce students to the essential concepts and approaches in analyzing literary works. It provides the tools needed to understand, evaluate, and interpret texts through various critical perspectives.

The course aims to build students' ability to think critically and engage with literature in a deeper and more meaningful way. By exploring different theories and applying them to texts, students will gain valuable insights and sharpen their analytical skills.

I hope this module serves as a helpful guide in your study of literary criticism and inspires a greater appreciation for the art of literature.

Sincerely,

Ahmad Rizal Abdullah, S.S., M.Hum.  
Universitas Negeri Makassar

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### A. DEFINITION AND IMPORTANCE OF LITERARY CRITICISM

#### 1. Definition of Literary Criticism

Literary criticism is a field of study that involves the evaluation, analysis, interpretation, and discussion of literary works. Unlike casual reading, which focuses on enjoyment or surface understanding, literary criticism seeks to uncover the deeper meanings embedded in a text. It is an intellectual activity that uses various theoretical frameworks to examine how a work is constructed, its themes, symbols, narrative structure, and its cultural or historical context.

At its core, literary criticism aims to answer fundamental questions about literature: *What does this work mean? How is it constructed? What does it tell us about the time and society in which it was written?* Critics approach these questions from multiple angles, utilizing theories from different disciplines such as linguistics, philosophy, psychology, history, and sociology.

Literary criticism is not merely a subjective exercise. It goes beyond personal opinion, relying instead on systematic methods and established theories. These theories may include Structuralism, Postmodernism, Feminism, Marxism, Psychoanalysis, and Postcolonialism, among others. Each of these approaches offers different ways to interpret a text, highlighting various elements of literature and human experience.

#### 2. The Importance of Literary Criticism

- **Enhancing Understanding of Literature**

Literary criticism enhances our understanding of literary works by encouraging a deeper engagement with the text. While casual readers might enjoy a story for its surface narrative, critics focus on uncovering the layers of meaning beneath the surface. Through

# CHAPTER II

## SEMIOTIC APPROACH IN LITERARY CRITISM

Semiotics, the study of signs and symbols, offers a powerful framework for analyzing literature as a system of meaning-making. Rather than focusing solely on the content of a text, semiotic criticism examines how meaning is constructed through language, cultural codes, and intertextual references. It reveals the deeper structures that govern how texts communicate with readers and how they reflect or challenge societal norms.

The semiotic approach draws on the foundational work of Ferdinand de Saussure, who laid the groundwork for understanding language as a system of signs, and Charles Sanders Peirce, who expanded the concept of signs into broader philosophical territory. Later, theorists like Roland Barthes adapted semiotics to literary and cultural analysis, developing tools to decode the intricate web of signs in texts. Together, these thinkers provide the theoretical backbone for semiotic literary criticism, which continues to evolve in the context of contemporary critical theory.

### A. FERDINAND DE SAUSSURE: THE LINGUISTIC FOUNDATION OF SEMIOTICS

Ferdinand de Saussure, often regarded as the father of modern linguistics, introduced a systematic approach to understanding how language functions as a system of signs. His theories, presented in *Course in General Linguistics* (1916), laid the foundation for structuralism and semiotics.

The Sign: Signifier and Signified

According to Saussure, a sign consists of two inseparable components:

- Signifier: The form of the sign, such as a spoken word, written text, or visual image.

# CHAPTER III

# PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH IN LITERARY CRITISM

## **A. UNDERSTANDING THE PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH**

The philosophical approach in literary criticism is a method that seeks to analyze literature through the lens of philosophical inquiry. Unlike other critical methods that might focus on the form, structure, or cultural context of a work, this approach is primarily concerned with the ideas, themes, and intellectual questions embedded within a text. Literature, in this context, is seen as a reflection of human thought, grappling with fundamental questions about existence, morality, knowledge, and the human condition.

Philosophical inquiry in literature often transcends the boundaries of storytelling, making texts a medium for exploring profound concepts. Authors may consciously or unconsciously embed philosophical ideas in their works, influenced by their own intellectual background or the prevailing ideologies of their era. For example, the existential themes of alienation and absurdity are evident in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, where the protagonist's inexplicable transformation into an insect serves as a metaphor for the human experience of estrangement in a seemingly indifferent universe.

This approach enables critics to delve into the deeper meanings of a text, moving beyond superficial interpretations to uncover the underlying philosophical questions it raises. It challenges readers to think critically about not only the narrative but also the broader implications of its themes.

## **B. OBJECTIVES OF THE PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH**

The philosophical approach in literary criticism has several key objectives, each aimed at deepening our understanding of literature and its relationship to human thought.

# CHAPTER IV

# PSYCHOANALYSIS

# APPROACH

The psychoanalytic approach to literary criticism is rooted in the theories of Sigmund Freud, particularly his work on the unconscious mind, repressed desires, and childhood experiences. Freud's ideas suggest that human behavior is often driven by unconscious desires and internal conflicts, many of which are repressed and cannot be directly expressed. When these repressed desires or memories resurface, they are typically manifested through dreams, symbols, and behaviors that are not fully understood by the individual. Applying these ideas to literature, psychoanalytic criticism aims to explore the psychological underpinnings of characters, narrative structures, and even the author's subconscious.

At its core, the psychoanalytic approach in literary criticism asserts that literature is not just an expression of creativity but also a manifestation of the unconscious mind—both of the author and the characters. By analyzing how unconscious desires, repressed thoughts, and childhood experiences influence the characters' actions and the development of the plot, psychoanalytic critics are able to reveal deeper meanings and hidden psychological dimensions within literary texts.

## **A. WHAT IS THE PSYCHOANALYTIC APPROACH?**

The psychoanalytic approach is an interpretive framework that uses principles from Freudian psychology to analyze and interpret literary works. The psychoanalytic critic looks at literature through the lens of Freud's concepts such as the unconscious, repression, and defense mechanisms to understand the psychological motivations behind a character's actions, thoughts, and desires.

## E. EXERCISE

1. What is the main idea behind the Psychoanalytic Approach in literary criticism?
2. How does **repression** play a role in understanding characters in literature?
3. Can you explain the difference between the **id**, **ego**, and **superego** in simple terms?
4. What is the **Oedipus Complex**, and how can it be applied to a character's relationship with their parents in a story?
5. How can **symbols** in literature represent a character's unconscious desires or feelings?
6. How does the **unconscious mind** affect a character's behavior and decisions in a story?
7. Why is it important to analyze a character's **hidden emotions** or **inner conflicts** using Psychoanalytic theory?
8. How does the **Psychoanalytic Approach** help us understand the relationships between characters in a text?
9. Can you give an example of a character in literature that shows signs of the **Oedipus Complex**?
10. How do **Freudian theories** like repression or the unconscious mind help in analyzing the themes of a literary work?

# CHAPTER V

## MARXISM APPROACH

### A. WHAT IS MARXISM?

Marxism is a social, political, and economic theory developed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in the 19th century. At its core, Marxism is concerned with how societies develop and organize themselves around the production of material goods and services. Marx's theory of history, known as historical materialism, posits that the economic base (the means and relations of production) is the foundation upon which the social, political, and ideological superstructure is built. According to Marx, human history can be understood as a series of class struggles driven by economic interests.

Marxism fundamentally divides society into two main classes: the bourgeoisie (owners of the means of production) and the proletariat (the working class who sell their labor to survive). Marx argued that capitalism is a system in which the bourgeoisie exploits the proletariat by extracting surplus value from their labor. This surplus value, or profit, is derived from the difference between the value workers create and the wages they receive. Marxism critiques this unequal power dynamic, advocating for the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of a classless, socialist society where the means of production are collectively owned.

Marxism is also concerned with alienation. In a capitalist system, workers are alienated from the products of their labor, from the process of work itself, from their fellow workers, and from their own human potential. This alienation is seen as a dehumanizing aspect of capitalism, and Marxists argue that it is only through revolutionary change that individuals can reclaim their humanity.

Another critical element of Marxist theory is the concept of ideology. Marxists believe that the ruling class uses ideology to maintain control over

# CHAPTER VI

## GENDER APPROACH

### A. INTRODUCTION

Gender is a fundamental concept that influences nearly every aspect of human society. It shapes personal identities, social roles, cultural norms, and institutional structures. However, the understanding of gender has evolved significantly over time. Traditionally seen as a binary division between male and female, gender is now understood as a complex and fluid spectrum that reflects biological, psychological, cultural, and social dimensions.

This essay provides a detailed introduction to the concept of gender, tracing its historical development, exploring its distinctions from biological sex, and examining its cultural and sociological implications. It also highlights contemporary debates around gender identity and the importance of adopting inclusive perspectives in understanding gender diversity.

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### 1. Defining Gender

#### 1.1. Gender vs. Sex

One of the key distinctions in understanding gender is differentiating it from biological sex. While sex refers to the physical and biological characteristics that define male, female, and intersex individuals, gender refers to the roles, behaviors, expectations, and identities that societies ascribe to people based on their perceived sex.

For instance, traits like aggression and assertiveness are often associated with masculinity, while traits like nurturing and empathy are linked to femininity. These associations, however, are socially constructed and vary across cultures and historical periods.

#### 1.2. Gender as a Social Construct

The idea that gender is socially constructed means that it is not an inherent or fixed attribute but rather a set of expectations and norms

# CHAPTER VII

## FEMINISM APPROACH

### A. INTRODUCTION

Feminism is a social, political, and cultural movement that seeks to achieve equality between genders, specifically advocating for women's rights and challenging systems of oppression that have historically marginalized women. At its core, feminism aims to address and dismantle patriarchal structures that perpetuate gender inequality and the marginalization of women in various aspects of life, including politics, economics, and social relations.

The term "feminism" was first coined in the late 19th century, but the roots of feminist thought trace back to earlier times when women began to question their societal roles and demand equal rights. The feminist movement has evolved over the years, with each wave focusing on different issues and concerns, but its central goal has always been the empowerment of women and the dismantling of oppressive gender norms.

Feminism is not a monolithic movement; it encompasses a variety of perspectives and approaches that emphasize different aspects of gender and inequality. It acknowledges that women's experiences are shaped not only by gender but also by other factors such as race, class, sexuality, and disability. This intersectional approach has become a key aspect of contemporary feminist thought, recognizing that various forms of oppression are interconnected.

While feminism is often associated with women's rights, it is not about elevating women above men; rather, it advocates for equality and the liberation of all people from restrictive gender norms. Feminism calls for a world where individuals can live freely and equally, without being confined by traditional gender expectations.

In addition to challenging social and political structures, feminism has also made significant contributions to literature, art, and culture. Feminist

# CHAPTER VIII

## READER RESPONSE

### APPROACH

#### A. INTRODUCTION

The Reader-Response approach to literary criticism is a method that emphasizes the reader's role in creating the meaning of a text. Unlike traditional approaches that focus solely on the author's intention or the inherent qualities of the text, Reader-Response criticism argues that a literary work comes alive only through the interaction between the text and the reader. In this perspective, meaning is not a fixed entity embedded in the text, but a dynamic process shaped by the reader's individual experiences, emotions, and imagination.

#### B. PRINCIPLES OF READER RESPONSE CRITICISM

##### 1. The Text as a Catalyst, Not a Container of Meaning

The Reader-Response approach posits that a text does not have a single, universal meaning. Instead, it serves as a catalyst that prompts readers to interpret and make sense of it based on their perspectives. A poem, novel, or play may evoke vastly different reactions depending on who is reading it, when, and under what circumstances.

##### 2. The Reader's Active Role

This approach highlights the reader as an active participant in the reading process. Rather than passively absorbing meaning, readers engage with the text, filling gaps, questioning ambiguities, and connecting elements to their own lives. Wolfgang Iser, a prominent figure in this approach, refers to this as the “gap-filling” process, where readers complete the incomplete aspects of a narrative.

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# Literary Criticism



Literary Criticism provides a comprehensive explanation of various critical approaches used to analyze literary texts such as structuralism, Marxism, feminism, psychological criticism and etc. This book discusses how each theory shapes our understanding of literature by examining the key concepts and methodologies of these approaches. Readers will gain valuable insights to interpret literary works in various ways.

This book not only presents theoretical foundations but also demonstrates their practical application in literary analysis. Through clear explanations and relevant examples, it serves as a guide for students, researchers, and literature enthusiasts who seek to engage with texts beyond surface-level reading. Designed as an essential resource for literary students, *Literary Criticism* combines between theory and practice. Whether you are a beginner or an experienced reader of literature, this book will equip you with the necessary tools to critically engage with texts, challenge conventional interpretations, and explore new dimensions of meaning in literature.



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