Types of Literary Analysis

* Formalist criticism: Formalist critics look closely at the work itself, analyzing the various literary elements of the work as a way of explicating or interpreting a text. This is a requirement of your research at the Honors level. You must include an analysis of the novel along with one of the following angles.
* Historical criticism: Historicist critics look at the impact of the politics, ideologies, and social customs of the author’s world on the themes, images, and characterizations of a text. This type of critic considers the historical events or conditions during which the work was written.
* The key here is to use your research on the historical and social context of the text to come up with a thesis on how the text and its context are related. This is not a history paper. One way to think about this particular methodology is as the attempt to study literature through history, asking how a text’s context can help us understand it more fully.
* Sociological criticism: Like historical criticism, sociological criticism examines literature in the cultural, economic, and political context in which it is written or received. This type of criticism may analyze the social content of a literary work—the cultural, economic, or political values a particular text implicitly or explicitly expresses.
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* Gender criticism: This type of criticism examines how sexual identity influences the creation and reception of literary works. Gender studies originated during the feminist movement, when critics began investigating the unexamined assumptions around gender in a piece of literature. Feminist critics explored how an author’s gender might—consciously or unconsciously—affect his or her writing. These critics may also explore how images of men or women in literature might reflect or reject the social norms around gender in a particular society.
* Mythological criticism: Mythological critics explore the universal patterns underlying a literary work. This type of criticism draws on the insights of anthropology, history, psychology, and comparative religion to explore how a text uses myths and symbols drawn from different cultures and epochs. A central concept in mythological criticism is the archetype, a symbol, character, situation, or image that evokes a deep universal response. For example, critic Joseph Campbell, in his books like The Hero with a Thousand Faces, demonstrates how similar mythic characters and situations, like the hero’s journey, appear in virtually every culture.
* Biographical criticism: Biographical critics explore how understanding an author’s life can help readers more thoroughly comprehend the literary work. Note: biographical critics are not concerned with simply describing the author’s life but instead with interpreting the literary work using the insights provided by knowledge of the author’s life.
* Psychoanalytic criticism: This type of criticism views the themes, conflicts, and characterizations of a work primarily as a reflection of the needs, emotions, states of mind, or subconscious desires of the author.
* Comparative/Synergistic
* A comparative essay is one in which you are called on to draw out similarities (or contrasts) between two or more elements. Most often, this will be between texts that have been covered in class, but it could also be between authors, genres, literary periods, or even between specific passages or characters in the same text.
* The goal here is to make connections and draw conclusions based on your comparisons (i.e. you must have a thesis about whatever you are comparing that is based on looking at them together.)
* It is not enough to just compare and simply describe the similarities (and/or differences)—your thesis is what really matters. That argument will be the product of your comparison and will answer the broader question of “why is it important that these texts (authors, periods) be read together/studied closely against one another?” What can we learn from these similarities or differences? How do they help us understand the text(s) more fully?
* Some strategies that might be helpful as your read/think about how to compare (and what the importance of these comparison are) include:
* Venn Diagrams
* Charts
* Lists