

## AP Literature and Composition: Critical Approaches

### A. Historical

1. Is this method of composition indicative of the period?
2. Is the subject matter representative of events occurring at this time?
3. Is the philosophical outlook indicative of the historical period?
4. How does the work relate to works in the same time period? To other periods?  
To works from other countries at this time?
5. What culture existed for this writer?
6. Is the work part of a historical trend (novel, Christian literature, allegory, political fiction, epic, etc.)?

### B. Biographical

1. Does this work reflect the writer's concerns and conflict? Examine elements within the work reflective of the writer's life (work, allusions to local and historical events, conflicts, themes, characters, settings, etc.).
2. Does this work take on greater significance because of the writer's life?
3. What were the writer's intentions (be very careful answering this question)? Who was the writer's audience?
4. Is this work representative of this writer's artistic development? Atypical?

### C. Social Criticism

1. What is the social situation the work describes? Does the work reveal anything about the culture in which it is set? (consider food/eating, clothing, religion, work/economy, class/social structure, housing/architecture, tools/utensils, arts/recreation, family, sex roles, education, transportation).
2. What was the author's attitude towards the social situation?
3. Does the writer seem to argue for a solution? Does the speaker feel society has to be the way he/she describes it?
4. Compare the author's depiction of an historical situation to the actual events (use secondary sources)?
5. Do particular economic and social theories explain the author's social concerns?

### D. Marxist Criticism

- A. Do the economic tensions in the text represent those in society?
- B. Does the text work reveal the economic pitfalls of capitalism?
- C. Examine ideology of the text. How is what the text says and does not say connected to the power structure and power relations of society? In other words, what are the methods of feeling, valuing, perceiving and believing that are valorized in this text? And how are those related to the maintenance and reproduction of social power?
- D. On a larger scale, how does the publication or suppression (popularity or not) of this text relate to the power structure of society? What about how the critics dealt with this text? Trace the critical responses toward the text over a period of time and relate to the power hierarchy in society?

E. Psychological

1. Can the conflict in the work be seen in terms of struggle by EGO (protagonist) to reconcile the conflicting demands of SUPEREGO (society) and by the ID (pleasure)
  - A. Are phallic symbols, womb symbols, or breast symbols emphasized?
  - B. What motivates the characters in the work? Can the conflict be seen as a struggle for power? A quest for identity?
  - C. What unconscious clues (dreams, symbol, metaphors) exist to help reveal the characters?

F. Archetypal/Mythological

Characters

1. Are any of the characters archetypes (hero, rake, scapegoat, outcast, hypersensitive youth, earth mother, terrible mother, princess, soul-mate, martyr, femme fatale, rebel, cruel stepmother, saint, "spiritual" woman, tyrannical father, star-crossed lovers, ruler, etc.

Situations

- A. Do characters go on quests? Initiations? Journeys? Fall from Grace? Experience death and rebirth? Complete a task? (For example, a hero's quest can involve a miraculous birth, early signs of greatness, period of withdrawal, journey/mission/quest, death {as scapegoat}, lack of burial, descent to underworld, atonement, resurrection, return to society, bestowing of boons on fellow humans.)
- B. Are human life cycles compared to seasons or days?

Symbols and Associations

- C. Do symbols suggest polarities or complementary images? Light-darkness? Water-desert? Heights-depths? Spring-winter? Activity-passivity? Male-female? Creativity-nurturing? Sky-earth?
- D. Do you recognize motifs like gardens (fertility) or oceans (unknown) or wind (spirit) or journeys (discovery) present?
- E. Do you recognize significant color symbolism such as green (new life)m red (blood, passion), white (purity)m black (evil)?

G. Formalism (New Criticism)

1. Are there paradoxes in the text yet an overall unity?
  - A. What does the title suggest? How does the work begin? What does the beginning promise? What is included in the work? Omitted, passed over, or summarized?
  - B. In what different settings does the action take place? How fully are settings described? How important is setting to action, character, theme?
  - C. How are characters developed by the author? Are they round or flat? Are they believable?
  - D. If this is fiction, how much use does the author make of dialogue? Dramatized incidents? Reflection or explanation by the narrator?

- E. If this is drama, how are lapses of time and action offstage handled? How effective would the piece be as theatre? What problems of casting and staging might occur?
- F. What is the author's tone? Matter of fact? Passionate? Apologetic? Reflective, etc?
- G. How would you characterize the style of the work? If it is a translation, compare it with the original or another translation.
- H. What are some themes of the work?
- I. Examine literary conventions and language (rhyme, meter, alliteration, plot, point of view, etc.) and relate to them.

#### H. Rhetorical

- 1. What are the characteristics of the persona?
  - A. What audience is implied?
  - B. What is the message of the work? Of what is the reader supposed to be persuaded?
  - C. What appeals are used?
    - Ethos-How is the persona presented as convincing and trustworthy?
    - Pathos-How does the persona appeal to the audience's emotions?
    - Logos-How are logic and reason used to persuade the audience?

#### I. Linguistic

- 1. What is the average sentence length? What is the proportion of dependent to independent clauses? Are the clauses right-branching (before the subject), left-branching (after the main clause), or embedded (within the main clause)?
- 2. What is the proportion of non to total words? Of verbs to total words? Of adjectives to nouns? Of descriptive to evaluative adjectives?
- 3. What elements are repeated – words, phrases, structures, images? What is the effect of the repetition? What elements are compounded? What is their effect?
- 4. What figures of speech are used? What kinds are they, what is their effect?
- 5. How would you characterize the author's diction?

#### J. Moral-Philosophical

- 1. What conflict occurs in the work? What differing values are implicit in it? What evidence is there of the author's values? Can you formulate a moral for the work?
- 2. Does the protagonist accept or reject the good values? Is it the right choice?
- 3. Analyze the actions and choices of each character in terms of Kohlberg's system of moral value:
  - Pre-conventional—seek reward, avoid punishment
  - Conventional—follow established rules or laws
  - Post-conventional—act on principle for the best
- 4. Can you formulate a question that the work is exploring?
- 5. Which of the following best describes the philosophical assumptions that underlie the work? Humanistic, theistic, nihilistic, agnostic, existential, rationalistic.

#### K. Structuralism

- 1. Does this work represent any type of genre?
- 2. Any linguistic analysis is part of structuralism.

3. What can you surmise about the psychological or material make up of the culture as it is revealed in this text? (Look for aspects of a culture such as technology, religion, tools, industry, food, ornaments, rituals) Literature is then seen as a system of signs, a sort of anthropological artifact of a culture.

#### L. Reader Response

1. What is the predominant effect this text had on you?
3. Why do you think the text had that effect?
  - A. Examine the nature of the text (subject matter, language, structure, use of familiar/unfamiliar conventions, organization, social norms, characters, themes, gaps or blanks in the structure that you have to fill in, etc.)
  - B. Examine the nature of the reader ( Did you have prior knowledge of or expectations about the text or about literature in general? What were your reading patterns – consistency building/ wandering viewpoint? Did you have knowledge/ lack of knowledge about the historical period in which the text was written?)
4. What does your response tell you about yourself? (Examine your style of reading, your values, your assumptions about literature, our society, our codes of behavior, your notion of what is normal or conventional)

#### M. Feminist

1. What are the attitudes toward women that are both explicit and implicit in the text? Analyze how the literary conventions (happy ending, for example) bring to light assumptions about women.
2. Is there a female culture or female consciousness that is divulged in this text? Analyze by drawing on other disciplines such as history anthropology, sociology, psychology, etc.
3. If this work is by a woman, when was it written? Published? Was there a lengthy lapse between the two? Research underlying reasons for the neglect of this work.
4. If this work is by a woman, examine the form and structure. Is it nontraditional (letters, journals, diaries, etc.)? Compare to traditional forms and hypothesize why the forms may vary.
5. Trace the criticism over a period of time about the women in the text. What kinds of analyses were made 50 years ago? 10 years ago? Today? Compare and contrast changes in literary criticism regarding women in the text (or the author if she is female) over time.