



## DISTORTED MIRRORS

How to read texts about vampires, zombies, werewolves – and people

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# LITERARY CRITICISM



Texts (both written texts and filmed “texts”) can be studied, analysed and interpreted using one or several approaches or “methods”. Each approach differs in what is looked at specifically – and how it is looked at. Some of the most well-known approaches are described in this section.

Try to imagine that a literary approach is like a pair of glasses. When you put them on, they tend to help you to focus on something specific, but they may also prevent you from seeing other things. For these reasons, it is often a good idea to try on various pairs of “glasses” to see as many aspects of the text as possible.

## BIOGRAPHICAL CRITICISM

**Important terms:**  
author, biography,  
reflection, intention,  
context

This traditional way of reading texts is based upon the assumption that there is a relationship between an author's life and his or her works of literature. The assumption is that a literary work always contains or mirrors events in the author's personal life and/or the author's ideology. Biographical criticism often entails focusing on people, places and events in the author's actual life in order to find parallels in the author's works of literature. The classic reading of Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale “The Ugly Duckling”, in which the duckling is interpreted as symbolic of Hans Christian Andersen himself, is an example of this.

This way of reading texts became unpopular in the 1920s because it was seen as limiting, but it often works well in minor doses combined with other approaches.

## NEW CRITICISM

**Important terms:**  
documentation, quotation,  
close reading, analysis, plot,  
character, setting, theme,  
literary devices

This analytical approach was founded mainly as a counter-reaction to Biographical criticism. The main idea is that texts can and should be studied and analysed without knowledge of their author or the era during which they were published. In other words, texts are considered autonomous aesthetic objects with no reference to the actual world surrounding them. A text stands alone. Anything worth looking at in relation to a given text, therefore, must be found *in* the text itself. This means that it is important for readers applying New criticism not to force some meaning, symbol or content *into* the text. Forcing an opinion into a text is often referred to as over-interpretation.

Much of the reading done in classrooms today is based on New criticism – and much of the emphasis on formal elements such as plot, character, setting and theme comes from this school of thought. This approach works particularly well in combination with other approaches. For instance, you may find inspiration for an interpretation using some of the following approaches, but simultaneously applying New criticism will ensure that you do not over-interpret.

## NEW HISTORICISM

**Important terms:**  
ideology, social criticism,  
socially critical, society, class,  
values, beliefs, reflection

New Historicism works on the assumption that texts are always expressions of the time periods during which they were written. This means that texts always directly, or indirectly, express beliefs about their own era, ideologies from their own era or criticism of their own era. For example, a text from the 1990s always says or implies something about the 1990s. Even if the text from the 1990s is set during World War I, it still indirectly or directly comments on the values, ideologies, etc. of the 1990s. Texts mirror the time of their composition. For example, J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* was originally published in the 1950s, after World War II. Using a New Historicist approach, we may consider the novels a comment on the political climate of the 1950s, on fascism and the role of the individual.

## FEMINIST CRITICISM

**Important terms:**  
gender, power, power  
relations, oppression,  
patriarchy, sexism,  
stereotype, male gaze

Approaching a text from a Feminist point of view often entails looking at mostly the female characters in the text in order to describe how they are presented – particularly in relation to the male characters in the text. Feminist criticism also looks at the way female characters are acting within social structures that are often patriarchal – created by men to the advantage of men. These female characters may play the role of victims of male oppression or of heroines who rebel against the stereotypes.

When approaching a text from a Feminist point of view, it may be beneficial to be aware of the theory of the *male gaze*. This theoretical concept emerged from film studies in the 1970s, and it claims that female characters are often depicted from a masculine point of view: by male authors/film makers and narrators, by male characters in the text/film and by male readers or audiences. This means that women are often tailored to the perspective of a heterosexual man: they are erotic objects subjected to male domination, and they are therefore passive.

## QUEER THEORY

**Important terms:**  
femininity, masculinity,  
gender, gender roles,  
normality, identity,  
sexuality, deviant,  
social construction,  
heteronormative,  
gender performativity,  
fluidity

Approaching a text from a Queer theoretical point of view often involves looking at how gender, sexuality and identity are presented in the text. Queer theory is based on the idea that gender and normality are socially constructed. This means that male-ness, female-ness, masculinity, femininity and normality are not natural and clearly defined. These concepts have been made by people and kept alive by the way we talk about them in society and daily life. They are kept alive by the words we choose – our language. Queer theory challenges all binary categories (such as “queer or straight” and “man or woman”). It also challenges the idea that identity is fixed and focuses on the fact that identity, sexuality and gender are fluid. They are not something we *have*, but something we *perform*. One important approach can be to look at the way the characters in a text live up to and respond to the expectations and gender roles placed upon them by themselves, others and society around them. Are they ruled by these ideas of normality, or do they rebel against them?

## STRUCTURALIST CRITICISM

**Important terms:**  
genre, genre traits, codes,  
conventions, norms,  
relationship, structure,  
model, Hollywood  
Model, Actantial Model,  
antithesis

Structuralist criticism is interested in the structures that make up any text. The approach is based on the notion that a text cannot be seen in isolation, but needs to be seen in the context of the larger structure which it is part of. For instance, a fairy tale must be seen in relation to other fairy tales – to the norms of the genre. Structuralist criticism tries to uncover these larger structures such as genres, cultural norms and values, literary codes and conventions, etc. Structuralist criticism is also interested in the elements in a text (like New criticism), but it is focused mainly on the relationship between these elements. An example could be the relationship between mood and weather in many texts – the idea that rain often accompanies a sad mood or a sad scene. This focus on relationships often results in the creation of models for text genres, and you probably know some of the more famous models: the Hollywood Model, the Actantial Model, etc.

## POST-COLONIAL CRITICISM

**Important terms:**  
alienation, the “other”,  
oppression, cultural  
identity, coloniser, col-  
onised, the West and the  
“rest”, stereotypes, power  
structures, master, slave,  
dominance, hegemony

Post-colonial criticism is an approach that deals with texts composed by colonial powers or colonised peoples. Post-colonial criticism looks at power relations (between coloniser and colonised), and it looks at the ideologies and cultural codes built into a text. It also often investigates the way in which post-colonial texts express either alienation or focus on strangers or “others”. This approach often looks at a text in relation to themes such as oppression, control, resistance, cultural identity and differences between the centre and the periphery.

Post-colonial criticism may be attempted on texts dealing with vampire or zombie invasions if we look at these invasions as a form of abstract colonisation – or a parody of colonisation.



## PSYCHOANALYTICAL CRITICISM

### Important terms:

id, super-ego,  
ego, the uncanny,  
desires, morals,  
behaviour, conflict,  
reality principle,  
unconscious

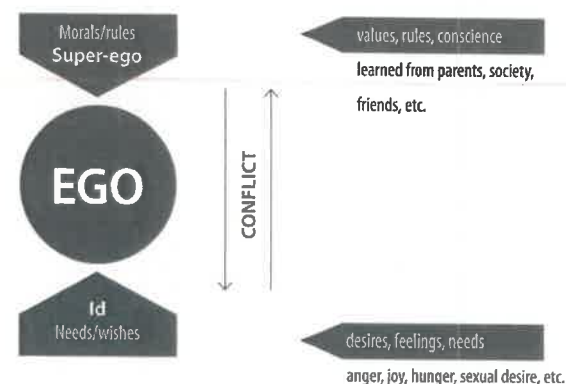
The Psychoanalytical approach is based on the theories of the psychologist Sigmund Freud. The Psychoanalytical approach typically looks at the psychology of important characters in a text.

Freud stated that the personality consisted of three aspects: the Id, the Ego and the Super-ego. All three aspects are to be found in everybody, but in order to have a reasonable degree of mental health, they have to be well balanced. The challenge in every person's psyche is that the Super-ego and the Id have conflicting demands. The Ego – so to speak – is caught in the middle and has to negotiate.

The Id functions in the *irrational* and emotional part of the mind. It is primitive and consists of all basic *desires, feelings* and *needs*. Anger, joy, hunger, sexual desire, etc.: all of these – and many more – are part of the Id. If the Id is too strong or uncontrolled, the person in question is driven by constant self-gratification and he/she is uncaring to others.

The Ego is the decision-making part of the personality. The Ego develops when a toddler grows up and realises that he/she cannot always get what he/she wants. The Ego *mediates* or *navigates* between the conflicting demands of the Id and the Super-ego. Ideally it tries to think up realistic ways of satisfying both Id and Super-ego. If the Ego is too strong, the person in question is extremely rational and efficient, but also cold and distant.

The Super-ego is the last part of the mind to develop. It is the moral part of the mind, and it contains all the values and rules a person has learned during his/her upbringing and socialisation. The Super-ego – in other words – consists of parental rules, societal rules, conscience, etc. If the Super-ego is too strong, the person in question is extremely controlled – and possibly controlling – but probably also feels guilty all the time.



Another term from Freud which may come in handy when analysing zombie, werewolf and vampire stories is *the uncanny*. When something is strangely familiar, or familiar and unfamiliar at the same time, this will typically make people feel uncomfortable. This is something that is often used in horror fiction, and examples could be a doll that looks like a doll, but has fangs or a vicious grin, or a monster that looks like a child but behaves like an adult. Zombies, werewolves and vampires may be described as uncanny because they have human form, but are not human in the traditional sense. Their uncanny nature may be reflected in how other characters react to them – and in how we as readers perceive them.