

The Ten Most Common Current Perspectives for Literary Criticism --in my view

1. The History of Ideas

Critics interested in the History of Ideas are concerned with noting the cultural origins and the cultural evaporation of any and all attitudes and ideas. For example, a historian of ideas would be interested in when, where, and why dueling became popular, and when, where, and why dueling is no longer practiced. Historians of ideas are interested, similarly, in the **history of attitudes** toward women, toward foreign peoples, toward religion and metaphysics, toward honor, duty, glory, fame, friendship, virtue, ethics, military success, intellectual achievement, and hundreds of other ideas.

Interest in the history of ideas stems from our curiosity about the diverse ways in which human beings have understood, ordered, and thought about the world in which they find themselves.

Historians of ideas **do not make moral judgments** about whether ideas or attitudes are good or bad; they just describe when and in what forms the ideas or attitudes flourished.

Being conscious of the history of ideas prevents us from judging other societies or other times by our own assumptions of what people should believe and how they should behave.

Interest in the History of Ideas began with the founding of the *Journal of the History of Ideas* at Johns Hopkins University during the 1920s. Interest in the History of Ideas was most prominent from the 1920s to the 1970s, though it retains considerable popularity.

When Aphra Behn in *Oroonoko* tries to tell Imoinda, a West African, of "the knowledge of the true God," meaning the Christian God, she has given evidence to Historians of Ideas about the European Christian certainty during the 17th century that their God was true and any other Gods were false.

2. New Criticism (Critical Formalism)

New Criticism is the most popular and most useful form of literary criticism, principally because it is interested in so many aspects of a literary work, among them its **characterization** (its "flat" or "rounded" characters, its use of protagonist, antagonist, reward characters, and foil characters), its **plot** (its chain of causes and effects, its achievement of suspense, its sense of fatefulness, its use of foreshadowing, its conflicts [external or internal], its climax, its denouement, its moral significance), its **setting** (what is told or shown to us, what is omitted, what emotional tone is set), its **theme** (emphasized or de-emphasized in various works, can be dialectic -- two forces in opposition that may or may not be resolved, called didactic or propagandistic if there is too much emphasis on theme) and its **clever uses of language** (its style, its thoughtfulness, and its tropes and figures).

New Criticism originated as a reaction against a sort of gossipy approach to literary studies that had been popular during the early 20th century, which took great interest in authors' social status, their friends, their escapades, their travels, their reading, and their private lives. New Criticism also was a reaction against "political" readings of works, such as marxist or fascist or religious readings.

The foundational texts of New Criticism were *Understanding Poetry* (1938) and *Understanding Fiction* (1942), textbooks written for American high school and college students by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren.

The major principles of New Criticism are:

1. that literature should be examined **and judged** as it appears on the page or on the stage (or on film), without regard for social context, or the author's intentions, or the reactions of the readers or audience
2. that literature is capable of being judged according to **objective**, apolitical criteria, and that critics have the responsibility to develop those criteria and to rate literature as excellent, very good, good, weak, etc, on the basis of those criteria
3. that literature, to be great, should attempt to set up a **mirror to reality**, imitating either visible life or the life of our minds, that its characters, for example, should remind us of people we know or of people who might have lived in the time period of the work of literature
4. that literature, to be great, must be carefully structured, that it must have an effective and appropriate beginning and ending, and that every word and scene in the book must contribute to an overall sense that the work is carefully **unified** (Aristotle called this unity of action and unity of character); digressions, or characters who are inconsistent, do not win the approval of new critics
5. that literature, to be great, must be **original**: a complex, not a simple or superficial look at human behavior
6. that literature, to be great, must be **timeless**, i.e. that it must have qualities that will as readily be appreciated by later generations as by its original audience
7. that the narrative voice in a story should not be confused with the voice of the author who wrote the story, and that studying the features of that narrative voice, particularly its **tone of voice**, can be very rewarding; the principal categories of narrative voice are usually said to be
 - a. unlimited omniscience, intrusive (Fielding) or unintrusive (Flaubert)
 - b. first person observer with limited knowledge (allows for irony)
 - c. first person participant (persona) (sometimes told in stream of consciousness) (allows for irony)
 - d. third person limited omniscience (a series of letters)
8. that before judging a work of literature, we should decide what genre it is written in (i.e. novel, short story, dramatic monologue, lyric poem, play, Hollywood film) and then judge the work according to our expectations of that genre
9. that literature consists foundationally of language, and that the language of any work of literature should be examined in detail for all its connotations and for any uses of **tropes, figures, and symbols**

New Critics are adamant that politics must be set aside when making comments on or decisions about literature.

New Critics object specifically to what they call the "intentional fallacy" (letting the author tell us what he or she means) and the "affective fallacy" (being concerned about how the reader "feels" about the work). They are very interested, though, in the implied intentions of the author that can be inferred from the words on the page.

The method that new critics use is called explication, a detailed examination of the multiple interrelations of words within the literary work.

New Criticism draws on critical methods as old as Aristotle, but it has been most popular from 1940 to the present. Though it retains its popularity, it has been under considerable attack since 1975 from New Historicists for its neglect of the social context of literature, from Structuralists for its assumption that language can "mirror" reality, from Deconstructionists for its assumption that literature is well organized and unified, and from Feminists and People of Color for its assumption that human nature as white, male, late 20th-century Christians see it is pretty much the same for all people all over the world.

3. Marxist Criticism

Marxist criticism sees literature first and foremost as one of the many products of the economic forces of the time in history in which it was created.

Marxist criticism is grounded in the economic and cultural theories of Karl Marx (1818-1883).

The major principles of Marxist criticism are:

1. that the history of humanity is largely determined by the reigning modes of material production, i.e., the overall economic organization of a country
2. that in any era of history, the dominant and the subordinate classes engage in a struggle for economic, political, and social advantage
3. that human consciousness is constituted by an **ideology**: the beliefs, values, by which a group explains what they take to be reality; an ideology is, in complex ways, the product of the position and interests of a particular class; **in any historical era, the dominant ideology embodies, and serves to legitimize and perpetuate the interests of the dominant economic and social class**
4. that the reigning ideology at any time or place is the superstructure of which the contemporary socioeconomic system is the base; to those who live with it, the reigning ideology seems a natural and inevitable way of seeing, but the reigning ideology in fact has the hidden function of legitimizing and maintaining the position, power, and economic interests of the ruling class;
5. that a work of literature is not a creative work, but a product of the economic and ideological determinants specific to that era

Some Marxist definitions: aristocracy: landowners by inheritance; bourgeoisie: owners of the means of production; proletariat: the working class; petty bourgeoisie: the self-employed; lumpen proletariat: non-thinking proletariat that can be manipulated by propagandists like Hitler.

Georg Lukacs, a Hungarian, is the most respected Marxist critic; he praised authors like Balzac, Dickens, and Tolstoy who portrayed in "realistic" terms the social conflicts of their day. Marxists value writers who are conscious of the privileges that power confers on or denies to their characters and institutions.

Marxists remind us that features of a work of literature like setting, character, dialogue, and plot often seem to us to be "natural" and to reflect "common sense," but all these features of a work carry ideological weight.

Marxist criticism explains the popularity of works like *Family Man* or *Star Wars*, as fantasy fed to the lumpen proletariat by the ruling classes to keep them happy and oblivious to the good reasons they have for rebellion.

Marxist Criticism has been popular in Europe since 1900, and since the 1960s in the United States; it is a reaction against New Criticism for ignoring the social circumstances in which literature is written and read.

4. New Historicism

New Historicism, a blend of History of Ideas Criticism and Marxist Criticism, is a reaction against New Criticism and Deconstruction for ignoring the social context of literature. New Historians also find Historians of Ideas to be too elitist, in that they tend to look mainly at the educated classes and their ideas, and simplistic, because they too often ignore economic reasons for the ideas that they study.

Michel Foucault, a French historian who wrote histories of criminality, sexuality, and institutions, is regarded as the founder of new historical thinking. In England, thinking very similar to New Historicism is called Cultural Materialism, and is best represented by the work of Raymond Williams.

The principles of New Historicism are:

1. that we should attend primarily to the historical and cultural conditions of a work's production: New Historicists considers a text as "embedded" in its context, as an **interactive component within the network** of institutions, beliefs, and cultural power-relations, practices, and products, that in their ensemble, we call history
2. that we should be fundamentally suspicious: New Historicists believe that ideology manifests itself in the discourse of each of the semi-autonomous institutions of any era, and that these institutions, including literature, subject readers to the interests of the ruling classes
3. that the mental operations we can perform are limited by the institutions in which we are already embedded
4. that the allusions in any work of literature and the traditions implicit in any work of literature limit the number of readers who can enjoy that work
5. that the **ruling classes** in any time and place **determine** what will be accounted as **knowledge, as truth, and as normal**
6. that works of literature contain modes of signification that war against one another (borrowing from Deconstruction)
7. that it is productive and important to try to determine the conventions, codes, and modes of thinking that invest any discourse, including literary works, with meaning
8. that **texts are "representations" of material reality colored by ideological pressures**
9. that history itself is a "text" that needs to be interpreted
10. that literature is not a special, or magical, or imaginative form of discourse; like all other texts it is dependent on economic, social, and political conditions
11. that unity or pleasure or reader satisfaction in a work of literature is to be distrusted, because it inevitably covers up real tensions and conflicts of power, class, gender, and social groups
12. that the humanistic idea of an essential human nature, which is felt by many readers of literature, is simply a widely held ideological illusion
13. that since readers too are products of their environment, the humanistic idea of an ideal or objective reader is also an illusion
14. that because historical forces are so great, authors have little or no "agency" in the production of their works
15. that insofar as the readers' ideologies differ from those of the writer, they will "appropriate" the text--that is, interpret it so as to make it conform to their own cultural prepossessions

New Historicists ask fundamental questions about how the distribution of power affects the production and consumption of literature: what explicit or explicit censorship was in effect when the work was written? who published the work? from what social classes or interest groups do its readers come? what resources (time, money, education) does it take to write [Robert Burns, Virginia Woolf: "A Room of One's Own"]? who gave the author the resources (time or money) necessary to write the book? who is expected or encouraged to write and read? who are the reviewers or critics who have the power to make the book popular? who constitutes the literary establishment? how is what we are likely to read determined?

New Historicism reminds us that many ideas that we take for granted, such as what is beauty, what is duty, what behavior is expected of a man, of a woman, of a child, of a servant, of a leader, are socially constructed rather than common sense ideas.

New Historicism has been popular since the early 1980s, and it is today probably the most popular method of criticism.

5. Structuralism

Structuralists view works of literature principally as **linguistic products**, or **assemblages of words**. Their thinking stems from the theories of the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, who emphasized the radical difference between a word, i.e. a **signifier**, and the "reality" which that word is meant to convey, i.e. the **signified**. Structuralists see language as a system of signs (words are not the only **signs**: gestures, pictures, rituals, any human alterations of nature are also signs), and they call the science of the study of signs **semiotics**. They believe that all texts in all mediums are constructs of signifiers.

Words, according to structuralists, are a very different medium from things, and they cannot be expected to reproduce things. Consequently, structuralists don't believe that literature presents characters, or settings, or actions, but only assemblages of words that the author hopes will give the impression of characters, or settings, or actions.

Structuralists explicitly oppose mimetic criticism (the view that literature is primarily an imitation of reality) and expressive criticism (the view that literature primarily expresses the feelings or temperament or creative imagination of its author)

Structuralists pay most attention to literary and linguistic conventions and the meanings that become accessible through them.

For Structuralists, literature is a system of conventions just as language is a system of words. Structuralists study patterns of words in literature, and therefore attend, for example, to the kinds of words (e.g. "once upon a time") that begin stories, the kinds of endings that novels tend to have, the way words are repeated in the course of a work of literature, the way chapters are formed, the patterns that appear most frequently in plots, etc. Structuralists are also interested in the connections /analogies between literary systems and other systems of human behavior.

Structuralists are well attuned to the differences in effect of different media. A stage play, for example, influences the audience in a much different way than does a novel, and structuralists will point to structural features like the stage, the curtain, the physical presence of the actors, and uses of light and sound which achieve those distinctive effects. Radio, television, and film also, structuralists point out, affect their audiences in very specific ways due to the nature of their media. Marshall McLuhan stated an extreme form of structuralism when he offered his aphorism, "the medium is the message."

Structuralism has been popular in Europe since 1920, and in the U.S. since the 1960s. It has been an influential, but never the favorite form of criticism.

6. Deconstruction

Like New Historicism, Deconstruction is a reaction against New Criticism, but Deconstruction objects not to New Criticism's emphasis on the isolation of the literary work from its cultural history, but to its emphasis on the unity and beauty of literature and its naive assumption that language can mirror reality.

Deconstruction, like Structuralism, is based on Saussure's theories of language, but unlike Structuralism, it is **distrustful of patterns**. It believes that all patterns are inherently false and unstable, and that the forces of chaos will be stronger than any author's attempt to create order.

The founder of Deconstruction is the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, the most famous of whose works are *Of Grammatology*, *Writing and Difference*, and *Speech and Phenomena*, all published in 1967. Paul deMan, a Dutchman who moved to the United States, was one of the first to apply Derrida's theories to the criticism of literature.

Deconstruction is similar to New Criticism, and perhaps even more extreme, in its interest in the work itself without regard to its social context. Deconstructionists insist that a reader or critic **cannot** get beyond the sequence of verbal signs in a work of literature to anything that stands outside the text.

The principles of Deconstruction (the first four here are very similar) are:

1. that many abstract concepts that have been strongly believed in in the Western traditions, concepts like nature, reason, truth, goodness, knowledge, identity, and the self, are mere words, and **we must be careful not to believe that they exist** as any kind of entity. [This aspect of deconstructionist thinking is called antifoundational. Deconstruction critiques foundational (Platonic) assumptions that these concepts exist.]
2. that there is no metaphysics of presence, i.e. that the fact that a word exists doesn't mean that a thing corresponding to that word exists. [Like structuralists, deconstructionists caution us against believing that characters or settings are real. Deconstructionists regard literary texts as merely plays of language.]
3. that all Western philosophy is logocentric, meaning that it assumes that there are referents to the words we use; instead, Deconstructionists argue that the only meaning in words are their differences from other words: "the absence of a transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely" (Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 280)
4. that we must be suspicious of the tendency in language to **reification**: we easily begin to believe that words that are used frequently e.g. black, courage, novel, geek, jock, whore, barbarian, are not just words but actual "things"
5. that we must **critique** the Western tendency to see life in terms of **dualities** in which one member of the pair is **tacitly or explicitly assumed to be superior** to the other member of the pair: e.g. mind/body, good/evil, true/false, male/female, objective/subjective, white/black, east/west, us/other, civilized/primitive, public/private, metaphysical/physical, nature/culture, human/animal, center/margin; Deconstructionists believe that these **culturally sanctioned antitheses** must be continually reexamined; the term Deconstruction itself is meant to undermine the either/or logic of the opposition construction/destruction
6. that we should be suspicious of the notion of the integral self; Deconstructionists regard human beings as disunified selves that are subjected to the uncontrollable workings of unconscious compulsions and the language field we live in
7. that all language is catachresis, i.e. the violent, forced, or abusive importation of a term from another realm to name something which has no proper name; that the acts and practices that constitute the "real world" are inseparable from the discourses out of which they arise and as open to interpretation as any work of literature
8. that we should be very suspicious of claims to literary unity; a Deconstructionist looks for contradictions: typically, a deconstructive reading sets out to show that conflicting forces within the text dissipate the seeming definiteness of its structure and meanings; each text, in their words, deconstructs itself

Overall, the ambition of Deconstruction is not only to disabuse us of believing in binary oppositions, but to disable the hierarchy of values they enable and to speculate on alternative methods of knowing and of acting.

Dialogic Criticism (associated with the Russian Mikhail Bakhtin) is related to Deconstruction, but it originated well before Deconstruction (in the 1920s and 1930s); Dialogic Criticism asserts that plots in novels or dramas do not "resolve" themselves at the end, but remain a medley of voices, social attitudes, and values that are not only opposed to one another but irreconcilable. According to Dialogic Critics, the effect of novels or plays, since they have this character, is carnivalesque, i.e. that they allow those who traditionally have little or no power a subversive voice. Bakhtin was eventually silenced by the Marxist government of the Soviet Union which preferred the view that there is a settled truth.

Deconstruction has had a strong following since about 1980, but it is also fiercely resisted and is very controversial. Many people find it nihilistic.

7. Feminist Criticism

Feminist Criticism is strongly embedded in the current political movement seeking social, economic, and cultural freedom and equality. As one Feminist Critic put it, "feminism is the radical notion that women are people."

The foundational texts of feminism are Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), and Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1969). Millett's title called attention to the fact that sexual interaction is often influenced the relative power of the people interacting.

Feminist Critics look for patriarchal or phallogentric (used by most as a symbolic but by some as a literal term) assumptions in literature, whether written by men or women. Feminist Critics, following a principle of Deconstruction, rebel against the traditional notion that women are the "other," a non-man, in contrast to man as the defining and dominant subject who is assumed to represent humanity in general. Feminist critics note the male bias in many theories of human behavior, including Freudian and Jungian psychological theory.

The principal assumptions of Feminist Criticism are:

1. that Western civilization is pervasively patriarchal, so pervasively so that women are taught in the process of being socialized to internalize the reigning ideology of male superiority and thus to denigrate their own sex and to cooperate in their own subordination
2. that our language both reflects and reinforces patriarchal control
3. that while one's sex is determined by anatomy, one's gender role is a cultural construct
4. that our language and our current ideology are as pervasively patriarchal as they are partly because until recent times by far the preponderance of writers were men [This argument applies equally to the situation of oppressed minorities.]
5. that our critical assumptions about literature are equally skewed in favor of male interpretations because by far the preponderance of critics until recent times were men
6. that women are often portrayed in literature as projections of men's desires, fears, or resentments

A feminist reading of any work of literature will look at the **relative power** of males and females portrayed in the work, at the assumptions concerning acceptable behavior of males and females in the work, at the cultural conditions at the time the work was written and the way they determined the relative opportunities for males and females at that time, at the conditions of authorship for males and females at the time the work was written, and at the pressures exerted consciously or unconsciously by male readers, male publishers, and male censors.

Feminists argue among themselves about whether there is a distinctively feminine consciousness (perhaps influenced by the strictly or predominantly female experiences of gestation, childbirth, nursing, and nurturing), or a distinctively feminine style of speech and writing. Some feel there is, some feel that the idea that there is is itself sexist.

A second point of controversy among feminist critics is whether to talk about male and female experience as distinctly different, or whether to see all human experience as proceeding along some kind of continuum from male to female (this latter view is of course influenced by Deconstruction's distrust of **binary oppositions**).

There has been some tension between white feminists and feminist women of color, but that tension has been largely resolved in recent years by the movement to a more inclusive feminism. This mutual understanding and cooperation within feminism has in some way become a model for what men could do in working toward interracial understanding.

Feminist Criticism became very popular in the late 1960s, following two centuries of struggle for women's rights. It remains very popular, well beyond the limits of people who would call themselves feminists.

8. Psychological and Psychoanalytic Criticism

Psychological Criticism deals with a work of literature primarily as an expression, in fictional form, of the state of mind and the structure of personality of the individual author. It takes as many forms as there are popular forms of psychological or psychoanalytic analysis. It stems originally from Sigmund Freud's brief comments on the workings of the artist's imagination at the end of the twenty-third lecture of his *Introduction to Psychoanalysis* (1920). The three psychoanalysts that have most strongly influenced literary criticism are Freud (Austrian), Carl Jung (Swiss), and Jacques Lacan (French).

The principle assumptions of Psychological Criticism are:

1. that the individual human personality is formed, and in all too many instances malformed, by the interaction of the biological impulses or "drives" with the controlling authority of the family, which is continuous with the authority of society and the state
2. that literature, like dreams and neurotic symptoms, consists of the author's imagined fulfillment of wishes that are either denied by reality or prohibited by social standards of morality and propriety
3. that literature appeals to readers because readers, like the authors, use the literary work to fulfill imaginatively wishes that are either denied by reality or prohibited by social standards of morality and propriety (the author's ability to sublimate wishes makes him or her able to satisfy the unconscious desires of readers as well)
4. that characters in literary works can illustrate the same psychological neuroses as do people in real life

Some subjects of interest to psychological or psychoanalytic critics are

1. condensation: fusion of several unconscious elements into a single entity
 2. displacement: substitution of a more acceptable object for an unconscious object of desire
 3. symbolism: the representation of repressed objects of desire by objects associated with them in prior experience (e.g. Huck Finn's taking to the river in place of his lost mother, or Joe Christmas's association of toothpaste with sexuality in Faulkner)
 4. the workings of the id (desire), the superego (conscience, authority, pride), and the ego (responsible negotiation) in the psyches of literary characters
 5. the workings of the unconscious
 6. denial
 7. cultural scapegoating
 8. fear of the other
 9. projection
 10. fetishization
 11. sexual analogies: Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* speaks of concave images as womb symbols and tall images as penis symbols
 12. the Oedipus Complex: unconscious rivalry with the father for the love of the mother
 13. the way our sympathy for a tragic character combined with our fear concerning his or her fate combines to produce a catharsis (cleansing of emotions) in the reader that is not only pleasurable but psychologically healthy
 14. the way literature itself can help us experience emotions vicariously, at a safe distance
- Carl Jung thinks not of the individual unconscious, but the collective unconscious, and has strongly influenced archetypal criticism. Jacques Lacan applies Freudian principles to language, emphasizing the effect that learning language, including its dominant oppositions (male/female, good/bad, true/false) has on the personality.

Psychological Criticism is the most controversial, most abused, perhaps the most enjoyed, and also the least appreciated form of criticism.

Psychological criticism has been popular since the 1920s, and its popularity has not waned.

9. Archetypal Criticism

Archetypal Criticism stems from the thinking and research of the Cambridge University comparative anthropologist, James Frazer, in *The Golden Bough*, published in several volumes from 1890-1915. Frazer found that there are many elemental patterns of myth that recur in the legends and ceremonies of far-flung cultures, and he felt that these patterns, when effectively presented in literature, strike a deep chord in human nature and evoke profound responses in readers. The psychologist, Carl G. Jung (1875-1961) was a great popularizer of archetypal analysis, as was Joseph Campbell.

Archetypal Critics look for universal symbols, evidence of the "collective unconscious" of the human race. They study recurrent narrative designs, patterns of action, character types, and images or symbols.

Archetypal plots include the quest, the initiation, the search for the father.

Archetypal patterns of action include creation, the journey underground, the heavenly ascent, death and rebirth, the cycle of seasons.

Archetypal characters include the the Promethean rebel-hero, the soulmate, the scapegoat (related the notion of sacrifice), the shadow, the wise old man, the trickster, the earth mother, the fatal woman.

Some of the "universal" symbols that Archetypal Critics have emphasized are

1. water: birth, creation, rebirth, purification
2. rising sun: birth, setting sun: death
3. tree: life, redemption (through Christ on the cross)
4. garden: paradise
5. desert: nihilism, hopelessness
6. blood: sacrifice, disorder
7. green: fertility, hope
8. blue: truth, religion
9. black: the unknown, death, evil, melancholy
10. white: purity, light, sometimes lack of emotion
11. circle: wholeness, unity
12. yang-yin: masculine light, activity, and consciousness vs. feminine darkness, passivity, and the unconscious (Jung admitted the limits of this theory later in his career)
13. serpent: evil, sexuality
14. numbers: three (unity and the Trinity), four (life cycle, the seasons), seven (perfect order)

Archetypal thinking has been criticized for being most interested in and even frequently assuming that there is only a male consciousness, and also for its confidence that the patterns it discovers are truly universal.

In literary criticism, the most distinguished practitioner of Archetypal Criticism was the Canadian Northrop Frye. In *The Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), for example, he argued that in all cultures there are four major genres (kinds) of literature: comedy, romance, tragedy, and satire, and Frye associates each of these genres with a season of the year: comedy (spring), romance (summer) tragedy (autumn) and satire (winter).

Archetypal Criticism has never been the most prominent form of criticism, but has had a steady and enthusiastic following since 1900.

10. Reader Response Criticism

Reader Response Criticism is not concerned with what the author intended, or with what the language of a literary work says, but only with the way that a single reader, or a group of readers (an **interpretive community**) responds to the work.

Reader Response Criticism challenges the New Critical assumption that a work is an achieved structure of meanings. It doesn't believe that the author or the words can control how readers respond. Defiantly, these critics believe that the meanings of texts are the productions or creations of the individual readers. Of course, the way we read a work of literature, or indeed any work, depends on the age we are when we read it and the experience we bring to it.

A question debated among Reader Response critics is how much the literary text can control, or at least constrain, its readers' responses.

In its structuralist form, Reader Response Criticism studies the literary conventions, codes, and rules, which, having been tacitly assimilated by competent readers, serve to structure their reading experience (Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, 1975).

Stanley Fish (*Is There a Text in This Class?* 1980) introduced the Reader Response idea of **interpretive communities**, each of which is composed of members who share a particular reading strategy, or set of community assumptions. An interpretive community is a group of people who share much the same reader response to a book. Fish's assumption is that there can be no universal "right reading" of any text, but that we must take into account the various readings that various interpretive communities arrive at.

One form of Reader Response Criticism is **reception criticism**, a study of the way various authors, like Shakespeare, Jonathan Swift, or Herman Melville, have been received throughout history.

By looking directly at the way that a literary work affects readers, Reader Response Criticism gets beyond the question of whether a work is great, good or weak (aesthetically), the question that New Critics would want to ask, and instead can look at the moral goods and evils that can result from a literary work: e.g. the way that Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* helped intensify the abolitionist movement just before the Civil War, or the way that Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* inspired women to higher aspirations, or the way that Shakespeare's portrayals of Othello (in *Othello*) and of Shylock (in *The Merchant of Venice*) and Ophelia (in *Hamlet*) have given cultural sanction (probably against Shakespeare's will) to racist, anti-semitic, and sexist attitudes in British culture.

Readers themselves have always been interested in Reader Response, but formal interest in Reader Response as a theory of interpretation has been strong only since the 1970s, beginning with the German Wolfgang Iser's *The Implied Reader* (1974).