Analyzing A Text

In criticizing writing, the observant reader should learn to look at the text in many different ways. Reading a story (or poem, or whatever) should be a bit like trying on glasses with different lenses. Each time you look at it, you see the same things, but you seem them in a new way. Literary criticism gives you a way to do that. Below, you will find the different major types of literary criticism and a note on how to use them:

**Biographical/Historical Criticism:** These styles use the information known about the writer and the time period to look at the text. Details from the author’s life might add to the meaning. It examines how the time in which it was written might have influenced the story. To use this, you need to research the author/time and really see if you can put yourself in those shoes. What might have been important then to those people.

**New Criticism:** This is, what I like to call, fancy criticism. It is what we use most often. These critics look at the form in which a text was written to analyze it. They ignore all history of the time and author and look only at the piece of writing itself. They use things like point of view, tension, narrative arc to explain important points within the text. To use this, you must ask yourself, “How does this text work?”

**Reader Response:** You may see this type of criticism a lot too. It is basically using text connections to understand a piece of literature as it relates to you. You, the reader, are the most important part of the text. Use your own feelings and knowledge to understand and analyze texts.

Those are the main ones. Here are some others you may find interesting:

**Psychoanalytic Criticism:** Use psychology to analyze the text and the writer. You can look at the writer as a person or the reader.

**Archetypal Criticism:** Analyzes the patterns of plots that happen over and over in our world and what our repetition of them might be saying about us.

**Marxist Criticism:** Uses the theories of Marx (founder of Comunism) to examine what the text might be saying about the conditions of the people at the time.

**Gender Criticism:** Look at a text examining the differences presented between the genders.

**Cultural Studies:** This examines how cultures and societies change, how power is distributed throughout the societies, and how differing cultures are represented in literature.

**Deconstruction:** This one is quite difficult to do. In deconstruction, you take a novel apart to look at the inconsistencies between what it is supposed to be saying and what actually happens. They look at the ways a novel does not quite fit the message it’s trying to portray.

In all literary criticism, highlighting and annotating are essential. Code your annotations and highlights so you know what theory you are using to explain things as you go.