
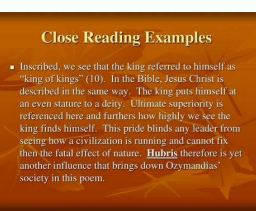


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**THREE CRITICAL APPROACHES IN LITERARY CRITICISM:
AN EXAMPLE ANALYSIS ON MATTHEW ARNOLD'S DOVER BEACH**

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Abstract. To approach a work of literature can be done in different ways. Some approaches can be used to analyze a literary work, such as psychological, historical, sociological, etc. To analyze one literary work, more than one approach can be applied. This article is an example of analyzing a poem, Matthew Arnold's *Dover Beach* from three different critical positions, the formalist, the sociological, and psychoanalytical. The formalist critics view work as a timeless aesthetic object. We may find whatever we wish in the work as long as what we find is in the work itself. The sociological critic views that to understand Arnold's 'Dover Beach', we must know something about the major intellectual social current of Victorian England and how Arnold responded to them. All psychoanalytic critics assume that the development of the psyche in humans is analogous to the development of the physique. 'Dover Beach' is richly suggestive of the fundamental psychic dilemma of man in civilization.

Keywords: approach, formalist, sociological, psychoanalytical

INTRODUCTION

Literary criticism has to do with the value of literature, its goodness or badness, not with the history of literature. Because value judgments tend to be highly subjective, lively, and sometimes even acrimonious, debates among literary critics accompany their diverse responses to and judgments of the same work. The judgment a literary critic makes about a story or poem is bound to reflect his own cherished values. The truth of the work of art is, obviously, very different from the truth of a mathematical formula. Certainly, one's attitude toward war, religion, sex, and politics are irrelevant to the truth of formula but quite relevant to one's judgment of a literary work.

Yet, any examination of the broad range of literary criticism reveals that a group of critics (and all readers, ultimately, are critics) share certain assumptions about literature. These shared assumptions govern the way the critic

approaches work, the elements he tends to look for and emphasize, the details he finds significant or insignificant, and finally, his overall judgment of the value of the work. To illustrate diverse critical methodologies, Matthew Arnold's poem "Dover Beach" is chosen. It is analyzed from three different critical positions: the formalist, the sociological, and the psychoanalytic. These three critical positions are selected not because they are the only ones, but because they represent three major and distinctive approaches of literary criticism that may help readers (or our students) formulate their responses to a work of literature.

It does not mean that one approach is more valid than the others or that the lines dividing the approaches are always clear and distinct. Readers will, perhaps, discover one approach more congenial to their temperament, more "true" to their sense of the world, than another. Again, they may find that some works seem to lend themselves to a different approach.

"Ozymandias" and Irony

Formalist Criticism

English 320

**Paper #1: Formal Analysis of a Poem
1300 – 1600 words (~4 – 6 pages)**

Please refer to the syllabus for the due date!

In a formal analysis of a poem (sometimes called an "explication"), you focus on the specific details of the text—on the words, considering how the formal properties of verse (what we've covered in the first five weeks of class) contribute to some overall meaning or significance in the text. Usually the analysis moves through the text sequentially; it discusses how the meaning of the text unfolds as readers make their way through it. An explication makes explicit the implicit points of the poem, and then goes on to explain how the poem does this by focusing on the formal properties most relevant to the particular text.

A formal analysis is an argumentative and thesis-driven paper—it's not just a summary or a paraphrase of the text. And while you'll need to examine the poem bearing in mind all the formal properties of poetry, your actual paper will focus only on those formal properties most relevant to this particular text. Explications usually move through the text sequentially, but not mechanically (that is, avoid writing a paper that's essentially a list: "In line one, the speaker says _____, and the reader understands _____. In line two, he goes on to say _____, and the reader understands _____.")

In preparing a formal analysis, you should examine every formal aspect of verse in the poem you're analyzing: speaker and tone, situation, figurative language, rhetorical strategies, structure—including rhythm and rhyme, verse form, and stanzaic form. Some of these formal properties will be more important than others to any specific poem; you'll ultimately ignore in your actual paper those formal elements that are less significant. (If rhyme isn't an issue in a poem, then don't mention it.) But in writing your notes on the text you should consider them all; a poem that doesn't sound as if it rhymes initially may prove to rely on internal rhyme or near rhyme. Don't make assumptions.

Your formal analysis should lay out a specific thesis about the poem (e.g., "In Gerard Manley Hopkins' 'Spring and Fall' a young child's innocent and perhaps naïve response to a natural event inspires an older companion to reconsider the nature of human loss"); the body of the paper should move through the poem systematically. For an examples, look at Eagleton's discussion of Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" (96 – 99). Eagleton focuses on what rhyme and meter in the poem contribute to its tone; he doesn't devote nearly as much time to "symbols" (although most people will agree that this poem lends itself to a symbolic reading). Eagleton builds to a thesis about the poem, rather than stating the thesis in the beginning; you may or may not be persuaded by his interpretation, but it's a good model of close attention to detail and how an accumulation of observations (and especially *focused* observation) can lead to a larger statement about a text's meaning. You might also consider his reading of Wordsworth's "Solitary Reaper," where he moves through the poem a stanza at a time, as the reader herself experiences the poem on a first reading (149 – 153).

You should also refer to the handout "Lit Crit Papers: What Faculty Know but Don't Always Articulate." It covers a variety of missteps that students take in critical essays. There's a link to it on the readings page of the course website.

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