Critical Approaches to Literature:
A Quick Reference

Moral/Intellectual Critical Approach
- This approach looks at the content and values (or morals) of a work, looking at morality, philosophy, and religious meaning and those meanings being true and significant to readers. You may ask yourself what the main theme of a work is and expand on it to express the moral or values.

Topical/Historical Critical Approach
- This approach stresses the relationship of literature to the location it is set in (topical) and the time period that it was written in (historical). Looking at the history of the time period allows more meaning of the story to come through and a specific understanding of characters and actions that fit inside that historical time period. It can also open up discussion of what was happening in a certain place during the time this story was written or if you live in the mountains how different that may be to living in the desert.

New Critical/Formalist Critical Approach
- This approach wants to end the historical approach because it wants to allow a work to stand alone as art no matter when it was written and without it having to be connected to any time or place. This approach wants readers to enjoy and connect to any work on any level, in any time period. So readers today should be able to connect to themes, ideas, and characters of works from 100 years ago. The other aspect of this approach is that it breaks down works into smaller parts to be studied (such as theme, tone, figurative language, characters,
etc.) and is not necessarily worried about finding meaning for the work as a whole. If you can find one line or paragraph that is meaningful and significant, then the work is deemed important even if the whole work is not discussed.

**Structuralist Critical Approach**
- This approach to literature is looking at how the structure (format/organization) of a story or poem (maybe the plot or a specific character, form, or theme) can be seen as similar to other story/poem structures (themes, tones, plots, characters) in other works. Looking not at the work as one single work, but how it connects to other works in the same genre (such as fiction, poetry, oil painting, etc.)

- **Archetypal/Symbolic/Mythic Critical Approach** can also be placed under Structuralist Approach because it is looking at how works from all different time periods and cultures have similar “archetypes” or models of humans. This is called “universal human consciousness” which allows all humans to connect to any culture or time period on the level of feeling the same as the characters would because they are human or they have human characteristics. These “humans” can be characters, speakers, or narrators.

**Feminist Critical Approach**
- This approach looks at the masculine-patriarchal view that most literature portrays and breaks down how the feminine side is not being represented and raises consciousness in how the feminine point of view could be represented. Take any work and ask questions like: how do the females think about themselves? How do the men treat the women? Are the female
representatives a positive or negative example? Do they follow the patriarchal stereotypes of women’s behavior? There are many other questions you can ask.

**Economic Determinist/Marxist Critical Approach**
- This approach deems that the primary influence of life is economically decided. So every thought and action of a speaker/character is going to be based on their economic status and those connecting societal structures.

**Psychological/Psychoanalytical Critical Approach**
- This approach looks at breaking down the minds of speakers/characters to see what makes them act in certain ways. The other side to this approach is looking at the author and what makes them write the characters’ traits and actions, or themes, or tones in certain ways. For this approach you need to understand what, psychologically, is making the characters or the author react in a certain way to what is going on in the poem/story.

**Deconstructionist Critical Approach**
- In this approach it supports the idea of there never being one correct interpretation of a work. The goal of this approach is to question other critics’ assessments of works to find out if there are other ways to interpret a piece besides this one interpretation. How to work with this approach is to take one work and break it down, “deconstruct” it using several different approaches.

**Reader-Response Critical Approach**
- This approach follows the idea that the author-text-reader all have a relationship and until the reader reads or interacts or assimilates the information of a work, the work is
not complete. So, however the reader can connect to the work on a personal or collective understanding of the characters and actions of the story, fits under this approach. This connection comes through personal experience of the reader and how their experience is similar or dissimilar to the work.