

The Sociological Approach to Literary Criticism

A person who examines a text closely, looking for deeper meaning and insights, is called a literary critic. There are several different approaches a literary critic can take when closely examining a text. One approach is called the sociological approach. According to X. J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia's *Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, and Drama*, when using the sociological approach, a critic "examines literature in the cultural, economic, and political context in which it is written or received." What does this mean? Let's break it down.

The critic might look at the society – or context – in which the text was written or s/he might look at the society in which the text is read or seen or heard. The critic might be asking, "What can the society that the author lived in tell me about his/her work?" or the critic might instead be asking, "What does this text mean to *our* society?"

What aspects of society might the critic examine? S/he might look at the culture of the society, including standards of behavior, etiquette, the relations between opposing groups (e.g., parents and children, the rich and the poor, men and women, religious beliefs, taboos, and moral values.) The critic might also look at the economy and politics of the society, including its system of government, the rights of individuals, how wealth is distributed, and who holds the power.

To discover what a text can tell us about the society in which it was written, ask:

- Who has the power in this society and who doesn't? Why?
- What are the official and unofficial rules (conventions, mores) of this society? What happens when a rule is broken?
- How are women supposed to behave in this society? How are men supposed to behave? How do men and women relate?
- What is valued in this society? (love, money, power, order, honesty, etc.)
- How does money affect individual's lives in this society?
- How do opposing groups (e.g., parents and children, the rich and the poor, men and women) relate in this society?
- What type of government does this society have? How is the ruler chosen? What rights do individuals have?
- How is wealth distributed in this society?

To discover what a text can tell us about *our* society, ask:

- What aspects of this society would most readers find unacceptable? What ideas have changed?
- What aspects of this society would be admirable to most readers? What has changed?
- Why does our society value this text? What "speaks to us?"
- How do we view the characters, plot, and themes differently than an audience in another time and place?

To discover whether the author is affirming or criticizing his/her own society, ask:

- Does the author seem to think the way his society works is acceptable or problematic?
- What values, virtues, character traits, and actions does the author either a.) not question or b.) seem to hold up for admiration?
- What values, virtues, character traits, and actions does the author seem to hold up for criticism?