

Biographical and Historical Literary Criticism

The purpose of biographical and historical criticism is to understand the work in context. Many experts argue that to truly understand a work you must consider that work as a product of a particular mind/life, culture, setting and time period. Some works, especially those that are highly symbolic, may be impossible to understand at all if one is not knowledgeable about the person or culture which created that work.

Our study of Puritan texts was mostly an effort at historical criticism. I gave you an introduction to the beliefs (culture) and history of the Puritans to help you understand the meaning of their works. Indeed, we identified those beliefs within the works as the central focus of our study of the works.

Questions to ask when engaging in biographical/historical criticism:

1. What facts about the author's life suggest ideas in the work? Did anything that happened to the author affect his or her themes or choice of subject matter?
2. What was the author's worldview? Which of the author's beliefs seem reflected in this work?
3. What commentary on the work did the author make? Does it point to ideas in the work? Can the author's intentions be understood through their own commentary on the work?
4. What worldview was typical of the author's time? What aspects of this worldview seem prevalent in this work? Does the author seem to accept or rebel against this worldview?
5. How did people respond to the author's work at the time it was initially published? What ideas did they find in it?
6. Do cultural/scientific/intellectual/technological developments of the time suggest or seem to influence ideas in the work?
7. How are ideas from the historical time period manifested in the work?
8. Sometimes our current worldview creates anachronistic readings of works—for instance, the phonograph wasn't invented until after Emily Dickinson's death, but if one did not know that, one might interpret her reference to "groove" in her poem as a reference to a phonograph. In what ways does an understanding of the time period and even the language of the time period reveal ideas in the work that might otherwise be misinterpreted?

Based on what you know about Hawthorne's biography, list several statements or questions about his works that relate to his experience. *Did Hawthorne purposely incorporate his religious views in his writing? Did Hawthorne base his feminine ideas off of what he grew up around due to the absence of a paternal figure? Did Hawthorne depict women or men as either the antagonists or the protagonists in his stories?*

Based on what you know about the time period—Romantic movement, Gothic romanticism, gender stereotypes, transcendentalism, etc.—list several statements or questions about Hawthorne's works that relate to the time period. *Were Hawthorne's views on women commonly accepted during the 1800s? How did transcendentalist views affect his own opinions? Did period-readers agree with Hawthorne's views and did they analyze his works to the extent that we are today?*

