What is literary criticism?

Literary criticism is the act of interpreting literature.

Literary criticism is the evaluation, analysis, description or interpretation of a particular literary work or an author's writings as a whole. It is usually in the form of a critical essay, but in-depth book reviews can sometimes be considered literary criticism.

How do I find it?
Finding literary criticism can be challenging. The library is a great place to start your research because we have both print and digital sources of information. While there are many good sources of literary criticism freely available on the Web, often better sources of information require a subscription. Napa Valley College Library has some great subscription online databases that are available to you as a student and community member (all you need is a SNAP library card for off-campus access).

Napa Valley College Library Website:
http://www.napavalley.edu/library
Click link: “Find Articles and Databases” to access NVC’s online subscription databases
Typical Research Flow

It is important to use a variety of information sources when conducting research. One approach is to start with print sources and work your way toward online information. You do not absolutely have to follow this sequence, but it helps to make sure you are covering all types of information available to you.

Reference Books ⇒ Circulating Books ⇒
Articles from Online Databases ⇒
The Web ⇒ Associations

When Looking for Criticism, Check For:
- The credentials of the writer
- Quality of the sources – academic journals, books, websites
- Opinions supported by evidence relating to:
  Characterization
  Voice
  Style
  Theme
  Setting
  Technical qualities of the writing (artistry, style, use of language)
  Complex ideas and problems
  Relationship of the work to the time, or social, historical, or political trends
Starting with the Basics: Terms & Concepts

Need a definition of allusion, Romanticism, satire or other literary concept? There are lots of books which define literary terms. These are two that NVC Library has in the reference section:


If you’d prefer to go online, the following are Websites which list literary terms with definitions and useful examples (written by an English professor).

http://www.virtualsalt.com/litterms.htm
http://virtualsalt.com/rhetoric.htm

Author Information

Looking for a book about your author or a volume of critical essays about a literary work?

BOOKS (REFERENCE & CIRCULATING)

When searching for books in the SNAP catalog, you can do a keyword search, but the best way to find good sources of information is to do a SUBJECT SEARCH. Subject searches look for LIBRARY OF CONGRESS SUBJECT HEADINGS assigned to a particular book. These headings help you find books which are specifically about your topic.
In many online catalogs, you can simply do a subject search for your author’s name, then browse a list of headings that begin with that name. Good subject headings for literary criticism often include the words “criticism and interpretation”.

Some examples of useful subject headings for literary criticism might be:

- Steinbeck, John, 1902-1968—Criticism and interpretation
- Walker, Alice, 1944—Color Purple
- American fiction—20th Century—History and criticism

ONLINE DATABASES FOR INFORMATION ABOUT AUTHORS

http://www.napavalley.edu/Library/Pages/FindArticles.aspx

Literary Reference Center (EBSCO) Database

You can enter an author’s name or choose “Browse Most Studied Authors”

Look at the tabs across the top for specific types of information:

- Biographies
- Reviews
- Images
- Literary Criticism
- Reference Books
- Periodicals
- Plot Summaries

Criticism & Summaries

Looking for some representative criticism on an author or book? Want a plot summary and character list for Romeo and Juliet?

The Gale Group publishes several series of literary criticism. Here at NVC Library we have the following in the Reference collection:

- **Contemporary Literary Criticism** Call number: REF 809 Contemporary v1-130. (For authors now living or who died after Dec. 31, 1999).
- **Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism** Call number: REF 809 Twentieth v1-218.
- **Masterplots** Call number: REF 809 Masterplots v1-12. (contains articles written by scholars)
(For authors who died between 1900 and 1999).

**Masterplots** Call number: REF 809 Masterplots v1-12. (contains articles written by scholars)

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**ONLINE DATABASES**

Search the *Literary Reference Center Database* for literary criticism as described on page 3. Choose the "Literary Criticism" tab. You can also check out some of the other databases including:

**Masterfile Premier**
(hint: type in "criticism and interpretation after typing the author’s name)

**WEBSITES**

The NVC Library Webpage contains an English Resources page found at: [http://www.napavalley.edu/Library/Pages/EnglishResources.aspx](http://www.napavalley.edu/Library/Pages/EnglishResources.aspx)

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