

Lenses for Reading Literature

Anytime we read a work of literature, we are able to read that work through a variety of lenses and focus on different details or meanings in that work depending on the “lens” we use. For example, sometimes we read through a lens that allows us to ignore the hidden meanings of a text and focus on the enjoyment that reading this text gives us. Other times, we might read through a historical lens, thinking about when a text was written and what it might have been saying about the historical period and society of the author. We might also read through a gender lens, focusing on the differences between male and female characters and seeing if issues of gender equality/inequality appear as we read.

Below is a list of lenses you might choose from when reading a text. I define each of these for the purposes of our class and Essay #3, but these lenses also relate to different schools of literary criticism. For a more detailed explanation of these schools, please see pages 1599-1627 in *Making Literature Matter* for definitions and examples.

1. **Ethnicity/Race/Culture:** This lens allows us to look at issues/conflicts/questions that arise in a text that relate to the ethnicities, races, and cultures of the characters in the text. It is particularly important to consider these issues when characters in the text come from different ethnic/racial/cultural backgrounds and the text reveals how the characters’ diverse backgrounds might cause confusion, conflict, or meaningful interactions. It is also important when stereotypes or prejudice results because of these differences. An example of this is Rita Dove’s “Parsley,” where the Dominican General Trujillo decided to kill many Haitian workers because they did not speak Spanish “properly.” Another example could be “Two Kinds,” where the Chinese mother and her Chinese-American daughter come into conflict.

When these differences in culture represent one group who is oppressed and another group that is in power (or colonizes/controls this oppressed group), this lens can be called **Post-Colonial Literary Criticism** (Schilb 1603). Also, for more information on this, visit <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/722/10/>.

2. **Gender:** This lens examines the conventional or traditional roles that men and women may play in a text and also how men and women might reject or protest or try to change these roles. An example of reading a text through a gender lens may be looking at the relationship between the narrator of “The Yellow Wallpaper” and her husband, John, or to think about how the gender of the aunt in “No Name Woman” contributed to her punishment and suicide and asking whether a man who committed the same act would be treated differently.

In literary criticism, this lens is often called **Feminist Criticism**. Feminist critics “hope to uncover and challenge essentialist attitudes that hold it is normal for women to be kept in domestic, secondary, and subservient roles, and they affirm the value of a woman’s experiences and perspectives in understanding the world” (Schilb 1601). For more information on this, visit <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/722/11/>.

This lens can also be used to talk about sexuality and sexual orientation. This approach is called **Gender Studies and Queer Theory** and raises questions about how characters of different genders or sexualities are portrayed/described in a text. For more information, please see <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/722/12/>.

- 3. History:** This lens considers how the time period and place is described in a text and how a writer's life may affect the way she writes about a particular time and place. Looking at a text through this lens means asking what a particular text says about a particular time and place. It also means thinking carefully about why a particular writer might depict a moment in history in a particular way and how a reader living in a particular time period or place might understand a text in a particular way. An example of this is Kurt Vonnegut's "Harrison Bergeron." This was written in 1961, a time in which many people in America were thinking about issues surrounding communism and capitalism. If we read this text through a historical lens, we might think about what Vonnegut might be trying to say about communism, capitalism, and equality. We might also think about what would be different in the story if Vonnegut had written this in 2010 vs. 1961. To what extent are Vonnegut's social concerns relevant today?

This approach is often called **New Historicism** (1601). Also, see the following website for more information: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/722/09/>.

- 4. Psychology:** This lens focuses on the internal struggles/issues/concerns of a character in a text. If we read a text through this lens, we may focus on the feelings of guilt, fear, or inner conflicts of a particular character, trying to understand what the character's emotional state may be and what the character's unconscious desires may be. An example of this is Sylvia Plath's "Daddy." Plath describes her speaker as suffering from something that Sigmund Freud calls the Electra complex, in which a daughter idolizes her father as a sort of God. Critics have also pointed out that the speaker has very ambiguous feelings about her father as she mourns his death, desires to be close to him, and also hates and fears him (269).

This approach is similar to **Psychoanalytic Criticism** and the theories of Sigmund Freud (1601). For more information, also see <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/722/04/>.

- 5. Social Class:** This lens often overlaps with lenses that examine culture, race, ethnicity, and history. Overall, this lens looks at the differences between social classes of characters. It looks at a text to see if there are any important differences in the economic or social status among characters. For example, when using this lens, you might ask yourself, is there one character who has a lot more money than the other characters? A lot less money than other characters? What are the different types of jobs that different characters hold? An example of using this lens might be reading through Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl" and thinking about the types of work that the characters in this text do. Are these jobs associated with prestigious social status or wealth? Why or why not? Why is this important in understanding the text?

This approach is often called **Marxist Criticism** because it addresses some of the class and economic issues that Karl Marx wrote about (1601). For more information, please see <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/722/05/>.