Literary Theories

During the year, you will be asked to review and apply the following literary theories to the works you study and create. You will use this page as a reference for definitions, characteristics, and examples of different literary perspectives. This list is not intended to be an exhaustive representation of these complex theoretical perspectives, but rather a brief introduction. Your teacher may expect you to do further research on one or more of these literary theories.

Reader Response Criticism

Reader Response criticism focuses on a reader’s active engagement with a piece of print or nonprint text. The reader’s response to any text is shaded by the reader’s own experiences, social ethics, moral values, and general views of the world. For example, the response to To Kill a Mockingbird may depend on the reader’s sense of outrage on behalf of someone unjustly accused of a crime.

Some common assumptions in the use of Reader Response criticism:

- When encountering a text, the reader does not only seek the meaning that inherently lies within the text, but also creates meaning from a personal interaction with the text.
- It is important to the discussion of the text to take into account the reader as well as the reading situation.
- Different readers formulate different acceptable interpretations because a text allows for a range of acceptable interpretations for which textual support is available.

Cultural Criticism

Cultural criticism examines how differing religious beliefs, ethnicities, class identifications, political beliefs, and individual viewpoints affect how texts are created and interpreted. What it means to be a part of—or excluded from—a specific group contributes to and impacts our understanding of texts in relation to culture. For example, in Things Fall Apart, the way the missionaries treat the natives suggests they see the native culture as inferior.

Some common assumptions in the use of Cultural criticism:

- Ethnicity, religious beliefs, sexual identity, and so on are crucial components in formulating plausible interpretations of text.
- While the emphasis is on diversity of approach and subject matter, Cultural criticism is not the only means of understanding ourselves and our art.
- An examination or exploration of the relationship between dominant cultures and the dominated is essential.
Archetypal Criticism

Archetypes are universal symbols—images, characters, motifs, or patterns that recur in the myths, dreams, oral traditions, songs, literature, and other texts of peoples widely separated by time and place. Archetypal criticism deals with the similarities of these patterns in the literature of widely diverse cultures. For example, most cultures have stories that present the hero’s journey.

Some common assumptions in the use of Archetypal criticism:

- Certain images recur in texts from diverse cultures that share a common interpretation—water, sun, colors, the tree, settings such as the garden, the desert.
- Certain characters recur—the hero, the trickster, the great mother, the wise old man, the prodigal son.
- Certain motifs and patterns recur—creation stories, the quest, voyage to the underworld, journey, and initiation.

Marxist Criticism

Marxist criticism asserts that economics provides the foundation for all social, political, and ideological reality. The presence of economic inequalities is a power structure that drives history and influences differences in religion, race, ethnicity, and gender. For example, status in the community of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* can be examined from an economic point of view.

Some common assumptions in the use of Marxist criticism:

- All aspects of humanity are based on the struggle for economic power.
- The basic struggle in human society is between the haves and the have-nots.

Feminist Criticism

Feminist interpretation focuses on relationships between genders. It examines the patterns of thought, behavior, values, enfranchisement, and power in relations between and within the sexes. A feminist reading of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, for example, may examine the novel as an example of a heroine’s journey.

Some common assumptions in the use of Feminist criticism:

- A pervasively patriarchal society conveys the notion of male dominance through the images of women in its texts.
- Many literary texts lack complex female figures and deem the female reader as an outsider or require her to assume male values in terms of perception, feelings, and actions.
- Issues of gender and sexuality are central to artistic expression.
- Fictional portrayals of female characters often reflect and create stereotypical social and political attitudes toward women.
- Texts authored by women may have different viewpoints than texts
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authored by men.

**Historical Criticism**

While acknowledging the importance of the literary text, the Historical approach recognizes the significance of historical information in interpreting literature. This perspective assumes that texts both influence and are influenced by the times in which they were created. For example, an interpretation of *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe may be enhanced by an understanding of the effects of colonialism in present-day African life.

Some common assumptions in the use of Historical criticism:

- A text cannot be separated from its historical context, which is a web of social, cultural, personal, and political factors.
- An understanding of a text is enhanced by the study of beliefs and artifacts such as diaries, films, paintings, and letters in existence when the text was created.

**Resources about Critical Perspectives**


