

Introduction to Literary Criticism

Have you ever.....

- Had a hard time finding something to say about a text?
- Read something that you felt was just wrong? Maybe it was biased, prejudiced, racist, or omitted a population of people?
- Been able to say why you did not enjoy a text without using the phrases “It sucked” or “I hated it” without support?
- Enjoyed a text but were not able to explain why it was amazing?

Literary criticism helps us learn how to see texts in new ways. There is no “right” answer, but rather several ways one can look at a text. Let’s look at a few....

Psychological Theory

A silhouette of a person in a suit stands on a floor composed of puzzle pieces. The person is holding up a large puzzle piece that fits into a large brain-shaped puzzle in the background. The scene is set against a blue, cloudy sky.

- Focuses on applying psychology to literature, focusing on the author's or characters' psyche
- Often uses Freudian psychology of the conscious & unconscious with a focus on the id, ego, and superego.
 - Id=basic desires, needs, drives; primitive behavior
 - Ego="reality principal;" how we get our needs met
 - Super-ego= moral or ethical influences

How to Apply...



- Does the text make you wonder “What was this person thinking?” or “What made someone write that?” Answer those questions!
- Look at character motivations. Are they driven by id, ego, or superego? Why?
- Think about what drives or motivates characters. What is the root of those drives?

Gender Theory



- Gender theory examines women's or men's roles in a text
- Are women exclusively mothers, caregivers, emotionally aware, or only doing 'women's work?'
- Are men exclusively heroes, warriors, physically strong, and unemotional?

Questions for gender criticism:

- What is the experience of women or men within a text?
- How does language value or devalue women or men within a text?
- What are the power relations of women and men within the text?

Cultural Studies

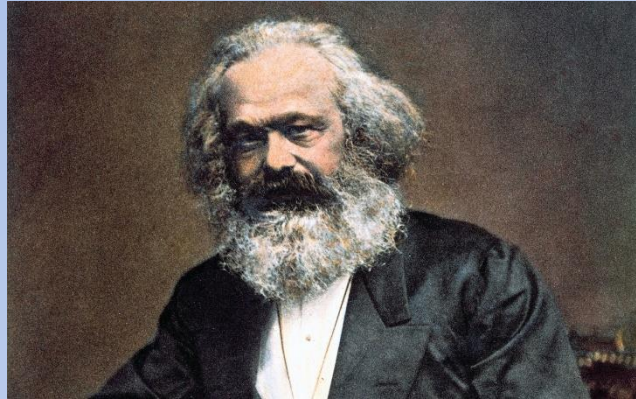
- Cultural theory focuses on the way different cultures are represented through texts.
- Cultural studies examines texts for the omission of different cultures as well. Many works of dominant cultures omit groups such as Africans, African Americans, and Native Americans.
- In reading a text with this lens, one would look for stereotypes of different cultures, omissions of cultures, or prejudice against certain cultures.
- Cultural theory can also be used to examine relationships between races.



Questions for cultural criticism:

- What is the dominant culture within a text?
- Are other cultures demeaned or devalued within a text?
- What cultures are omitted from the text?
- Is cultural bias a factor on the plot? Does character bias create conflict?
- How did the author's position in society influence cultures within a text?

Marxist Criticism



- Marxism focuses on the idea of social classes and the tensions between the dominant and repressed classes.
- Marxism also deals with *commodification*, which is valuing objects or people not for their qualities, but for their power to impress others (ex. Buying name brand clothes, designer furniture, etc...)
- Marxist criticism can examine whether characters accept or reject the ideals of the dominant class or whether those of lower social classes are devalued or omitted from the text.

Questions for Marxist criticism:

- Is there a struggle between the dominant class and the lower classes?
- How does the social class of the author relate to the concepts within the text?
- How does the text relate to the social assumptions of the time period?
- Does capitalism play a role within a text? How are characters influenced by economy and social class?

Biographical Theory

- Similar to psychological theory, biographical theory examines the life of the author.
- One of the major foundations of this theory is that the author's life always shapes the text.
- To apply, one would compare the author's biography to the work and look for similarities within character and circumstance within the text.

To sum up...

- There are many different lenses through which texts can be examined.
- The text may lend itself to looking at it through a particular theory, or several.
- Critical theories help us see that to which we might not otherwise pay attention.

Try It!

We will look at a series of images. Ask yourself:

- What theory might best be used to explain or discuss what you see?
- What might the theory tell us about the image?
- Does the theory help us see something new, or from a different point of view?

I'm here in the middle of Times Square to show off my best feature: My bones. What's my secret? Milk. It helps give bones the calcium they need to stay strong. And since they grow until about age 35, I'd say that's news worth putting on display.

got milk?

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What's next?

- We are going to be completing a paper in class in which we use critical theory to explain a fairy tale.
- Literary theory is a great way to get “into” a text. It also offers an opportunity to open specific discussion