

Classroom Activities

Note to teachers: Several of the activities use the original terms *feminist* and *Marxist*, rather than or in addition to *gender* and *social power/class*. Teachers should feel free to adapt the materials for their classrooms.

Activity 1.	Little Miss Muffet, by Russell Baker	137
Activity 2.	Group Exercise for "Separating," by John Updike	139
Activity 3.	A Matter of Perspective	140
Activity 4.	Literary Perspectives Tool Kit	141
Activity 5.	Literary Theories: A Sampling of Critical Lenses	145
Activity 6.	Literary Theory Cards	149
Activity 7.	Theory Wars: Looking at <i>Star Wars</i> Through Critical Lenses	153
Activity 8.	Literary Theory: Prisms of Possibilities	154
Activity 9.	Upon Seeing an Orange	155
Activity 10.	Reader Response and <i>Running Fiercely Toward a High Thin Sound</i>	156
Activity 11.	Reader Response and <i>Native Son</i>	157
Activity 12.	Key Ideas of Karl Marx	158
Activity 13.	Reading <i>Hamlet</i> Through the Marxist/Social-Class Lens	160
Activity 14.	Looking at <i>The Great Gatsby</i> Through Critical Lenses	163
Activity 15.	Through Rose-Colored Glasses: The Feminist/Gender Lens	167
Activity 16.	What Color Are Your Walls? The Feminist/Gender Lens	170
Activity 17.	A Lens of One's Own: Using Feminist/Gender Literary Theory	172
Activity 18.	<i>Death of a Salesman</i> and the Social Construction of Gender	174
Activity 19.	Getting to the Heart of the "Other": The Postcolonial Lens and <i>Heart of Darkness</i>	177
Activity 20.	Contemporary Literary Theory and <i>Shrek</i>	180
Activity 21.	Deconstruction	181
Activity 22.	"On the Subway," by Sharon Olds: The Gender Lens	185
Activity 23.	"On the Subway," by Sharon Olds: The Formalist/New Critical Lens	186

Activity 24.	“On the Subway,” by Sharon Olds: The Social-Class Lens	187
Activity 25.	“On the Subway,” by Sharon Olds: The Reader Response Lens	188
Activity 26.	“Ode to Family Photographs,” by Gary Soto: Three Perspectives	189
Activity 27.	Literary Theory: Among the Things We Carry	190
Activity 28.	Literary Theory: A Frankenstein Monster	191
Activity 29.	Critical Encounters: Reading the World	192
Activity 30.	From Reading Words to Reading the World: Critical Lenses in Literature and in Life	194
Activity 31.	Waking Up to <i>The Awakening</i> ; or, What’s Gender Got to Do with It?	196
Activity 32.	Theory Relay: Perspectives on <i>Native Son</i>	197
Activity 33.	Reader Response and (<i>Text</i>)	199
Activity 34.	Looking Through Lenses: Our First Look	200

ACTIVITY 2

Group Exercise for “Separating,” by John Updike

Read the story “Separating” on your own. Then, get into groups of three or four and work together on the following questions.

1. List all the characters that appear in the story.
2. From whose point of view is the story told?
3. Summarize the story from that character's point of view. That is, according to the character you named in question 2, what happens in this story?
4. Now, pick another character from those you listed in question 1. Summarize the story from the viewpoint of that character.
5. Reread the last two paragraphs of the story. Speculate together on what will happen next. Is there any reason to believe that Richard and Joan might not separate?
6. Extend the story. Write at least one page *from the point of view of the character you used in question 4.*

ACTIVITY 3

A Matter of Perspective

Let's explore the notion of perspective. Much contemporary fiction violates traditional narrative expectations by telling the story from the perspective of different characters, rather than from the perspective of a single protagonist.

1. Tell the story of "The Three Little Pigs."
2. Now look at the children's book *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs, as Told by A. Wolf*. What differences does that switch in perspective make?
3. Think of a family story, preferably one that is retold often and is a part of your family mythology. In a paragraph or so, tell that story from your own perspective. Write your version below.
4. Now think of another family member, and retell the story from his or her perspective. Write that version below.
FAMILY MEMBER: _____
5. In groups of no more than four, share those stories and discuss the difference that perspective makes. How can we know what the "true" version of the story is?

ACTIVITY 4

Literary Perspectives Tool Kit

Literary perspectives help us explain why people might interpret the same text in different ways. Perspectives help us understand what is important to individual readers, and they show us why those readers end up seeing what they see. One way to imagine a literary perspective is to think of it as a lens through which we can examine a text. No single lens gives us the clearest view, but it is sometimes fun to read a text with a particular perspective in mind because you often end up discovering something intriguing and unexpected. While readers typically apply more than one perspective at a time, the best way to understand these perspectives is to employ them one at a time. What follows is a summary of some of the best-known literary perspectives. These descriptions are extremely brief, and none fully explains everything you might want to know about the perspective in question, but there is enough here for you to get an idea about how readers use them.

The Reader Response Perspective: This type of perspective focuses on the activity of reading a work of literature. Reader response critics turn away from the traditional idea that a literary work is an artifact that has meaning built within it; they turn their attention instead to the responses of individual readers. Through this shift of perspective, a literary work is converted into an activity that goes on in a reader's mind. It is through this interaction that meaning is made. The features of the work itself—narrator, plot, characters, style, and structure—are less important than the interplay between a reader's experience and the text. Advocates of this perspective believe that literature has no inherent or intrinsic meaning that is waiting to be discovered. Instead, meaning is constructed by readers as they bring their own thoughts, moods, and experiences to whatever text they are reading. In turn, what readers get out of a text depends on their own expectations and ideas. For example, if you read "Sonny's Blues," by James Baldwin, and you have your own troubled younger brother or sister, the story will have meaning for you that it wouldn't have for, say, an only child.

The Archetypal Perspective: In literary criticism, the word *archetype* signifies a recognizable pattern or model. It can be used to describe story designs, character types, or images that can be found in a wide variety of works of literature. It can also be applied to myths, dreams, and social rituals. The archetypal similarities between texts and behaviors are thought to reflect a set

of universal, even primitive, ways of seeing the world. When we find them in literary works, they evoke strong responses from readers. Archetypal themes include the heroic journey and the search for a father figure. Archetypal images include the opposition of heaven and hell, the river as a sign of life and movement, and mountains or other high places as sources of enlightenment. Characters can be archetypal as well; some examples are the rebel-hero, the scapegoat, the villain, and the goddess.

The Formalist Perspective: The word *formal* has two related meanings, both of which apply within this perspective. The first relates to its root word, *form*, a structure's shape that we can recognize and use to make associations. The second relates to a set of conventions or accepted practices. Formal poetry, for example, has meter, rhyme, stanzas, and other predictable features that it shares with poems of the same type. The formalist perspective, then, pays particular attention to these issues of form and convention. Instead of looking at the world in which a poem exists, for example, the formalist perspective says that a poem should be treated as an independent and self-sufficient object. The methods used in this perspective are those pertaining to close reading, that is, detailed and subtle analysis of the formal components that make up the literary work, such as the meanings and interactions of words, figures of speech, and symbols.

The Character Perspective: Some literary critics call this the “psychological” perspective because its purpose is to examine the internal motivations of literary characters. When we hear actors say that they are searching for their character's motivation, they are using something like this perspective. As a form of criticism, this perspective deals with works of literature as expressions of the personality, state of mind, feelings, and desires of the author or of a character within the literary work. As readers, we investigate the psychology of a character or an author to figure out the meaning of a text (although sometimes an examination of the author's psychology is considered biographical criticism, depending on your point of view).

The Biographical Perspective: Because authors typically write about things they care deeply about and know well, the events and circumstances of their lives are often reflected in the literary works they create. For this reason, some readers use biographical information about an author to gain insight into that author's works. This lens, called *biographical criticism*, can be both helpful and dangerous. It can provide insight into themes, historical references, social oppositions or movements, and the creation of fictional characters. At the same time, it is not safe to assume that biographical details from the author's life can be transferred to a story or character that the author has created. For example,

Ernest Hemingway and John Dos Passos were both ambulance drivers during World War I and both wrote novels about the war. Their experiences gave them firsthand knowledge and created strong personal feelings about the war, but their stories are still works of fiction. Some biographical details, in fact, may be completely irrelevant to the interpretation of that writer's work.

The Historical Perspective: When applying this perspective, you view a literary text within its historical context. Specific historical information will be of key interest: information about the time during which an author wrote, about the time in which the text is set, about the ways in which people of the period saw and thought about the world in which they lived. *History*, in this case, refers to the social, political, economic, cultural, and intellectual climate of the time. For example, the literary works of William Faulkner frequently reflect the history of the American South, the Civil War and its aftermath, and the birth and death of a nation known as the Confederate States of America.

The Social-Class Perspective. Some critics believe that human history and institutions, even our ways of thinking, are determined by the ways in which our societies are organized. Two primary factors shape our schemes of organization: economic power and social-class membership. First, the class to which we belong determines our degree of economic, political, and social advantage, and thus social classes invariably find themselves in conflict with each other. Second, our membership in a social class has a profound impact on our beliefs, values, perceptions, and ways of thinking and feeling. For these reasons, the social-power perspective helps us understand how people from different social classes understand the same circumstances in very different ways. When we see members of different social classes thrown together in the same story, we are likely to think in terms of power and advantage as we attempt to explain what happens and why.

The Gender Perspective: Because gender is a way of viewing the world, people of different genders see things differently. For example, a feminist critic might see cultural and economic disparities as the products of a “patriarchal” society, shaped and dominated by men, who tend to decide things by various means of competition. In addition, societies often tend to see the male perspective as the default, that is, the one we choose automatically. As a result, women are identified as the “Other,” the deviation or the contrasting type. When we use the gender lens, we examine patterns of thought, behavior, value, and power in interactions between the sexes.

Deconstruction. Deconstruction is, at first, a difficult critical method to understand because it asks us to set aside ways of thinking that are quite natural

and comfortable. For example, we frequently see the world as a set of opposing categories: male/female, rational/irrational, powerful/powerless. It also looks at the ways in which we assign value to one thing over another, such as life over death, presence over absence, and writing over speech. At its heart, deconstruction is a mode of analysis that asks us to question the very assumptions that we bring to that analysis. Gender, for example, is a “construct,” a set of beliefs and assumptions that we have built, or constructed, over time and experience. But if we “de-construct” gender, looking at it while holding aside our internalized beliefs and expectations, new understandings become possible. To practice this perspective, then, we must constantly ask ourselves why we believe what we do about the makeup of our world and the ways in which we have come to understand the world. Then we must try to explain that world in the absence of our old beliefs.



ACTIVITY 5

**Literary Theories: A Sampling of Critical Lenses**

Literary theories were developed as a means to understand the various ways in which people read texts. The proponents of each theory believe that their theory is *the* theory, but most of us interpret texts according to the “rules” of several different theories at one time. All literary theories are lenses through which we can see texts. There is no reason to say that one is better than another or that you should read according to any of them, but it is sometimes fun to “decide” to read a text with one in mind because you often end up with a whole new perspective on your reading. What follows is a summary of some of the most common schools of literary theory. These descriptions are extremely cursory, and none of them fully explains what the theory is all about. But it is enough to get the general idea.

Archetypal Criticism. In criticism *archetype* signifies narrative designs, character types, or images, which are said to be identifiable in a wide variety of works of literature, as well as in myths, dreams, and even ritualized modes of social behavior. The archetypal similarities within these diverse phenomena are held to reflect a set of universal, primitive, and elemental patterns, whose effective embodiment in a literary work evokes a profound response from the reader. The death-rebirth theme is often said to be the archetype of archetypes. Other archetypal themes are the journey underground, the heavenly ascent, the search for the father, the heaven/hell image, the Promethean rebel-hero, the scapegoat, the earth goddess, and the femme fatale.

Gender/Feminist Criticism. A feminist critic sees cultural and economic disabilities in a “patriarchal” society that have hindered or prevented women from realizing their creative possibilities, including woman’s cultural identification as merely a passive object, or “Other,” and man is the defining and dominating subject. There are several assumptions and concepts held in common by most feminist critics:

- Our civilization is pervasively patriarchal.
- The concepts of “gender” are largely, if not entirely, cultural constructs, effected by the omnipresent patriarchal biases of our civilization.
- This patriarchal ideology pervades those writings that have been considered great literature. Such works lack autonomous female role models, are implicitly addressed to male readers, and shut out the woman reader as an alien outsider or solicit her to identify against

herself by assuming male values and ways of perceiving, feeling, and acting.

This type of criticism is somewhat like Marxist criticism, but instead of focusing on the relationships between the classes it focuses on the relationships between the genders. Under this theory you would examine the patterns of thought, behavior, values, enfranchisement, and power in relations between the sexes. For example, “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been” can be seen as the story of the malicious dominance men have over women both physically and psychologically. Connie is the female victim of the role in society that she perceives herself playing—the coy young lass whose life depends on her looks.

Social-Class/Marxist Criticism. A Marxist critic grounds his or her theory and practice on the economic and cultural theory of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, especially on the following claims:

1. The evolving history of humanity, its institutions, and its ways of thinking are determined by the changing mode of its “material production”—that is, of its basic economic organization.
2. Historical changes in the fundamental mode of production effect essential changes both in the constitution and power relations of social classes, which carry on a conflict for economic, political, and social advantage.
3. Human consciousness in any era is constituted by an ideology—that is, a set of concepts, beliefs, values, and ways of thinking and feeling through which human beings perceive, and by which they explain what they take to be reality. A Marxist critic typically undertakes to “explain” the literature of any era by revealing the economic, class, and ideological determinants of the way an author writes. A Marxist critic examines the relation of the text to the social reality of that time and place.

This school of critical theory focuses on power and money in works of literature. Who has the power/money? Who does not? What happens as a result? For example, it could be said that “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” is about the upper class attempting to maintain its power and influence over the lower class by chasing Ichabod, a lower-class citizen with aspirations toward the upper class, out of town. This would explain some of the story’s descriptions of land, wealth, and hearty living that are seen through Ichabod’s eyes.

New Criticism is directed against the prevailing concern of critics with the lives and psychology of authors, with social background, and with literary

history. There are several points of view and procedures that are held in common by most New Critics:

1. A poem should be treated as primarily poetry and should be regarded as an independent and self-sufficient object.
2. The distinctive procedure of the New Critic is explication, or close reading: the detailed and subtle analysis of the complex interrelations and ambiguities of the components within a work.
3. The principles of New Criticism are fundamentally verbal. That is, literature is conceived to be a special kind of language whose attributes are defined by systematic opposition to the language of science and of practical and logical discourse. The key concepts of this criticism deal with the meanings and interactions of words, figures of speech, and symbols.
4. The distinction between literary genres is not essential.

Psychological and Psychoanalytic Criticism. Psychological criticism deals with a work of literature primarily as an expression, in fictional form, of the personality, state of mind, feelings, and desires of its author. The assumption of psychoanalytic critics is that a work of literature is correlated with its author's mental traits:

1. Reference to the author's personality is used to explain and interpret a literary work.
2. Reference to literary works is made in order to establish, biographically, the personality of the author.
3. The mode of reading a literary work itself is a way of experiencing the distinctive subjectivity or consciousness of its author.

This theory requires that we investigate the psychology of a character or an author to figure out the meaning of a text (although to apply an author's psychology to a text can also be considered biographical criticism, depending on your point of view). For example, alcohol allows the latent thoughts and desires of the narrator of "The Black Cat" to surface in such a way that he ends up shirking the self-control imposed by social mores and standards and becomes the man his psyche has repressed his whole life.

Reader Response Criticism. This type of criticism focuses on the activity of reading a work of literature. Reader response critics turn from the traditional conception of a work as an achieved structure of meanings to the responses of readers to the text. By this shift of perspective a literary work is converted into an activity that goes on in a reader's mind, and what had been features of the

work itself—narrator, plot, characters, style, and structure—is less important than the connection between a reader’s experience and the text. It is through this interaction that meaning is made. Students seem most comfortable with this school of criticism. Proponents believe that literature has no objective meaning or existence. People bring their own thoughts, moods, and experiences to whatever text they are reading and get out of it whatever they happen to, based on their own expectations and ideas. For example, when I read “Sonny’s Blues” I am reminded of my younger sister who loves music. The story really gets to me because sometimes I worry about her and my relationship with her. I want to support her and am reminded of this as I see that Sonny’s brother does not support Sonny.

Other theories we’ll be discussing in class include the following:

Deconstructionist Criticism. Deconstruction is by far the most difficult critical theory for people to understand. It was developed by some very unconventional thinkers, who declared that literature means nothing because language means nothing. In other words, we cannot say that we know what the “meaning” of a story is because there is no way of knowing. For example, in some stories (such as Joyce Carol Oates’s “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?”) that do not have tidy endings, you cannot assume you know what happened.

Historical Criticism. Using this theory requires that you apply to a text specific historical information about the time during which an author wrote. *Historical*, in this case, refers to the social, political, economic, cultural, and intellectual climate of the time. For example, William Faulkner wrote many of his novels and stories during and after World War II, a fact that helps to explain the feelings of darkness, defeat, and struggle that pervade much of his work.

ACTIVITY 7

Theory Wars: Looking at *Star Wars* Through Critical Lenses

In your groups, discuss the questions below. You will be asked to share the fruits of your discussion with the whole class in your symposium.

1. Try to recall the first time you saw this film. In what ways was the class viewing different from your first viewing? What were some things you noticed that you didn't notice before? What seemed to be important this time that didn't come through in a previous viewing?
2. Think back to our discussions of archetypes from last year. Describe how characters, plot, conflict, or theme in *Star Wars* could be viewed in archetypal terms. For example, is this a classic story of good versus evil? Is Princess Leah the typical heroine?
3. Read through the handout on literary theory. Select the two theories that you think might be most helpful in illuminating the film. Write down the theories below.
 1. _____
 2. _____
4. Now come up with some statements about the film for each of the theories you named in question 3. For example, if you selected feminist criticism you might discuss the lack of female characters and evaluate the role of Princess Leah from a feminist perspective. If you chose reader response theory you might describe how the film reminded each of you of a personal experience in your struggle with good and evil. (Use loose-leaf paper—journal potential.)
5. After you discuss these interpretations, decide how to present them to the whole class. Your presentation should be no more than about 10 minutes of your symposium.

ACTIVITY 8

Literary Theory: Prisms of Possibilities



Read the Sylvia Plath poem and discuss it in your group, using the assigned lens. We will consider each lens when we reconvene as a large group.

	Reader Response	Biographical	Feminist/Gender	Marxist/Social Class
What aspects of the poem lend themselves to this particular lens?				
Cite specific textual passage(s) that support this reading.				
If you look through this lens, what themes or patterns are brought into sharp relief?				
If you look through this lens, what questions emerge?				
Do you believe in this reading? Why or why not?				

ACTIVITY 9

Upon Seeing an Orange



- | | |
|------------------------------|---|
| Gender theory asks: | What possibilities are available to a woman who eats this orange? to a man? |
| Formalism asks: | What shape and diameter is the orange? |
| Social class theory asks: | Who owns the orange? Who gets to eat it? |
| Postcolonialism asks: | Who doesn't own the orange? Who took the orange away? |
| Reader response theory asks: | What does the orange taste like? What does the orange remind us of? |
| Structuralism asks: | How are the orange peel and the flesh differentiated into composite parts of the orange? |
| Deconstruction asks: | If the orange peel and the flesh are both part of an "orange," are they not in fact one and the same thing? |

ACTIVITY 11

Reader Response and *Native Son*

Context

(What factors surrounding my reading of the text are influencing my response?)



(What personal qualities or events relevant to this particular book might influence my response?)

(What textual features might influence my response?)

Context

ACTIVITY 12

Key Ideas of Karl Marx**Stages of History**

Marx believed that history moved in stages: from feudalism to capitalism, socialism, and ultimately communism.

Materialism

Each stage was mainly shaped by the economic system. The key to understanding the systems was to focus on the “mode of production.” (For example, most production under feudalism was agricultural, while most production under capitalism was industrial.) It also was necessary to focus on who owned the “means of production.” (Under capitalism a small class—the bourgeoisie—owned the factories. Under socialism, the factories would be owned by the workers.)

Class Struggle

“The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.” Each system, up to and including capitalism, was characterized by the exploitation of one class by another.

The Dialectic

Marx argued that great historical changes followed a three-step pattern called thesis-antithesis-synthesis (he adopted this idea and terminology from an earlier German philosopher, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel). Any idea or condition (thesis) brings into being its opposite (antithesis). The two opposites then conflict until they produced a new, higher stage (synthesis). For example, in the Marxist dialectic, the existence of the ruling bourgeoisie under capitalism made necessary the existence of its opposite, the proletariat, and the synthesis of their struggle would be a utopian classless society.

Internal Contradictions

Each class system therefore contained the seeds of its own destruction, which Marx sometimes called “internal contradictions.” Capitalism, he believed, was plagued by such contradictions, which would get worse and worse until they destroyed it.

Capitalism

Marx saw capitalism as the cruelest, most efficient system yet evolved for the exploitation of the working majority by a small class of owners. It was the nature of capitalism, Marx believed, for wealth and ownership to be concentrated in an ever-shrinking mega-rich class. This was one of many internal contradictions of capitalism that would inevitably destroy it.

Working Class Misery

It was the nature of capitalist production methods to become more and more technologically efficient, requiring fewer and fewer workers to produce more and more goods. Therefore capitalism would be plagued by bouts of high unemployment. As machines made workers' skills less important, wages would be pushed ever downward. As each worker became simply an appendage of a machine, his job would be less satisfying, and he would become more alienated.

Class Consciousness

Such total exploitation of so many by so few could not last forever. The workers would inevitably develop "class consciousness," that is, an awareness of their predicament. When that occurred, it would be fairly simple for them to take over the factories and the state.

The End of History

Since class conflict was the engine that drove history, and since under communism there would be no class distinctions, history would come to its final resting place in a system free of exploitation.

ACTIVITY 13

Reading *Hamlet* Through the Marxist/Social-Class Lens**Act 1. Warm-Up Discussion**

First things first. This stuff can be pretty cool, but it takes a bit of practice. It can be hard, but I've heard you're pretty smart readers. So here goes. Have you considered Marxist/social-class literary theory in your reading before? With what texts? How did that consideration affect your reading of the text as a whole?

The article you read, "Marxist Criticism" by Stephen Bonnycastle, states that in order to understand *Hamlet* from a Marxist perspective, you need to know something about Shakespeare's times and the class struggle present then. What *do* you know about that?

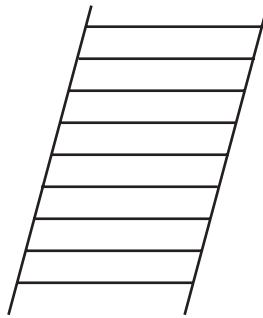
An **ideology** is a view of the world, a prevailing set of beliefs. What are some examples of ideologies you have come across?

What is the prevailing ideology that is represented in *Hamlet*? Are there other, differing views of the world that fight with one another within the text? Explain.

Act 2. In Three, and Then as a Class

Marxist/social-class criticism pays a lot of attention to the social structures that allocate power to different groups in society. List some of the social groups that are represented in *Hamlet*.

We've all heard the term *social ladder*. Try plotting some of the *Hamlet* characters on the social ladder diagram below.



Name some of the primary power struggles that the play portrays. Who has the power, and who doesn't?

Conflict between

Has Power	Has No Power

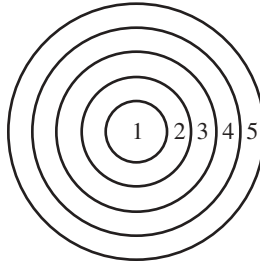
Put a * next to the power struggles that could be considered class conflicts.

Act 3. On Your Own

The following questions should be done on your own. You don't have to share your responses to the first one, but we may discuss your responses to the second and third questions in class tomorrow.

Marxist literary theory asserts the importance of paying attention to class conflicts, power struggles, and how we place ourselves within the particular social structure in which we find ourselves. Draw a picture or diagram of the

existing power or class structure in which you live. You can have it look like the social ladder we used above; you can draw concentric circles or use the ones below; you can map or web—anything is fine. Where are you, relative to where power and money is located?



To what degree do you think this location may have affected your reading of *Hamlet*? Which characters in *Hamlet* do you feel most closely represent where you are socially.

Marxist literary theory encourages us to look at the big political questions that surround our more personal concerns. List below some of the big questions that emerge for you as a result of reading *Hamlet* through a Marxist lens.

Now think of one or two smaller, more personal, and perhaps more important questions that emerge for you as you think about issues of class conflict, ideologies or beliefs, and struggle. List them below.

ACTIVITY 14

Looking at *The Great Gatsby* Through Critical Lenses

Literary theories were developed as a means for understanding the various ways in which people read texts. The proponents of each theory believe that their theory is *the* theory, but most of us interpret texts according to the “rules” of several different theories at a time. All literary theories are lenses through which we can see texts. There is nothing to say that one is better than another or that you should read according to any of them, but it is sometimes fun to read a text with one in mind because you often end up with a whole new perspective on your reading. We are going to apply two lenses to *The Great Gatsby*, the Marxist/social-class lens and the gender lens.

Definitions

Social-class criticism grounds its theory and practice on the economic and cultural theory of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, especially on the following claims:

1. The evolving history of humanity, its institutions and its ways of thinking, are determined by the changing mode of its “material production”—that is, of its basic economic organization.
2. Historical changes in the fundamental mode of production effect essential changes in both the constitution of and power relations between social classes, which carry on a conflict for economic, political, and social advantage.
3. Human consciousness in any era is constituted by an ideology—a set of concepts, beliefs, values, and ways of thinking and feeling through which human beings perceive and by which they explain what they take to be reality. A social-class critic typically undertakes to “explain” the literature in any era by revealing the economic, class, and ideological determinants that inform the way an author writes, and by examining the relationship of the text to the social reality of the time and place in which it is set.

This school of critical theory focuses on power and money in works of literature. Who has the power/money? Who does not? What happens as a result?

Strategies for applying the social class lens include the following:

1. Explore the ways in which different groups of people are represented in texts. Evaluate the level of social realism in the text—how is the society portrayed?

2. Determine the ideological stance of the text—what worldview does the text represent?
3. Consider how the text itself is a commodity that reproduces certain social beliefs and practices. Analyze the social effect of the literary work.

Gender criticism is somewhat like social-class criticism, but instead of focusing on the relationships between social classes it focuses on the relationships between the genders. In using this theory, you would examine the patterns of thought, behavior, values, enfranchisement, and power in relations between the sexes. There are many different kinds of gendered literary theory. Some theorists examine the language and symbols that are used to see how language and use of symbols is gendered. Others remind us that men and women write differently and analyze how the gender of the author affects how literature is written. Many gender theory critics look at how the characters, especially the female characters, are portrayed and ask us to consider how the portrayal of female characters reinforces or undermines sexual stereotypes. Gender literary theory also suggests that the gender of the reader affects his or her response to a text. For example, gender critics may claim that certain male writers address their readers as if they were all men and exclude the female reader.

Much gender theory reminds us that the relationship between men and women in society is often unequal and reflects a particular patriarchal ideology. Those unequal relationships may appear in various ways in the production of literature and within literary texts. Gender theory invites us to pay particular attention to the patterns of thought, behavior, values, and power in those relationships.

Gender critics remind us that literary values, conventions, and even the production of literature have themselves been historically shaped by men. They invite us to consider writings by women, both new and forgotten, and also ask us to consider viewing familiar literature through a gendered perspective.

Strategies for applying the gender lens include the following:

1. Consider the gender of the author and of the characters. What role does gender or sexuality play in this work?
2. Specifically, observe how sexual stereotypes might be reinforced or undermined. Try to see how the work reflects or distorts the place of women (and men) in society.
3. Think about how gender affects and informs relationships between the characters.
4. Consider the comments the author seems to be making about society as a whole.

You can now use both these lenses to interpret characters, passages, and themes in The Great Gatsby.

The Question of Power

Name some of the primary power struggles that the novel portrays. Who has the power and who doesn't?

From the Perspective of Gender

Has Power	Has No Power

From the Perspective of Class

Has Power	Has No Power

Passages

Using the social-class lens, what is the significance of this passage?

Every Friday five crates of oranges and lemons arrived from a fruiterer in New York—every Monday these same oranges and lemons left his back door in a pyramid of pulpless halves. There was a machine in the kitchen which could extract the juice of two hundred oranges in half an hour if a little button was pressed two hundred times by a butler's thumb. (p. 40)

Using the gender lens, what is the significance of this passage?

Well, she was less than an hour old and Tom was God knows where. I woke up out of the ether with an utterly abandoned feeling, and asked the nurse right away if it was a boy or a girl. She told me it was a girl, and so I turned my head away and wept. “All right,” I said, “I’m glad it’s a girl, and I hope she’ll be a fool—that’s the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool.” (p. 17)

Themes

Finish these sentences:

From the social-class perspective, *The Great Gatsby* is a novel about . . .

From a gender perspective, *The Great Gatsby* is a novel about . . .

Further Questions

Social-class and gender literary theory encourage us to look at the big political questions that surround our more personal concerns. List below some of the big questions that emerge for you as a result of reading *The Great Gatsby* through social-class and gender lenses.

Social-Class Questions:

Gender Questions:

Now think of one or two smaller and more personal questions that emerge for you as you think about issues of class conflict, ideologies or beliefs, gender, and power. List them below.

ACTIVITY 17

A Lens of One's Own: Using Feminist/Gender Literary Theory**1. What is the feminist/gender lens?**

Feminist literary criticism helps us look at literature in a different light. It applies the philosophies and perspectives of feminism to the literature we read. There are many different kinds of feminist literary theory. Some theorists examine the language and symbols that are used and how that language and use of symbols is “gendered.” Others remind us that men and women write differently and analyze how the gender of the author affects how literature is written. For example, feminist critics may claim that certain male writers address their readers as if they were all men and exclude the female reader. Many feminist critics look at how the characters, especially the female characters, are portrayed and ask us to consider how the portrayal of female characters reinforces or undermines sexual stereotypes. Feminist literary theory also suggests that the gender of the reader often affects his or her response to a text.

Like feminism itself, feminist literary theory asks us to consider the relationships between men and women and their relative roles in society. Much feminist literary theory reminds us that the relationship between men and women in society is often unequal and reflects a particular patriarchal ideology. Those unequal relationships may appear in various ways in the production of literature and within literary texts. Feminist theorists invite us to pay particular attention to the patterns of thought, behavior, values, and power in those relationships.

Feminist literary critics remind us that literary values, conventions, and even the production of literature have themselves been historically shaped by men. They invite us to consider writings by women, both new and forgotten, and also ask us to consider viewing familiar literature through a feminist perspective.

2. How do we apply the feminist/gender lens?

We apply it by closely examining the portrayal of the characters, both female and male; the language of the text; the attitude of the author; and the relationship between the characters. We also consider the comments the author seems to be making about society as a whole.

3. Is Virginia Woolf a feminist?

In groups of two or three, state whether the feminist literary lens would meet with Virginia Woolf's approval. Does she agree that our readings are “gendered”?

Does she believe that women characters and writers are marginalized? Be prepared to defend your statement with at least two quotations from *A Room of One's Own*.

Our position is :

Quotation 1:

Quotation 2:

4. Application: Looking through the feminist lens

Select two female characters from novels with which you are very familiar. They could be from works we have read together or from texts you have read in previous English classes. For example, you might choose Daisy from *The Great Gatsby*, Hester Prynne from *The Scarlet Letter*, or Sonya from *Crime and Punishment*.

Name each character and write two descriptive statements for each—one from a traditional masculine perspective and the second from a feminist perspective.

CHARACTER 1

Traditional statement:

Feminist/gender statement:

CHARACTER 2

Traditional statement:

Feminist/gender statement:

ACTIVITY 18

Death of a Salesman and the Social Construction of Gender**1. Consider the following words:**

fashion, football, breadwinner, pilot, strength, flower, ambitious, perseverance, compassionate, bossy, helpless, thoughtful, soft, brassy, dangerous, perpetrator, victim, attractive, opinionated, hostile, emotional

Using your first instinct and without overthinking, write each word in the column that seems most appropriate:

Male	Female	Both	Neither

2. Consider the theory.

Our ability to assign gender to words or constructs has to do with what some people call “the social construction of gender.” Using the feminist lens is one way to examine gender construction, but the notion of the social construction of gender broadens the lens to more fully consider how both men and women are affected by this social construction.

Read through the following explanations of the social construction of gender:

The Construction of Gender

This theory acknowledges that men and women are actively involved in constructing their own gendered identities. We adopt different masculinity and femininity practices depending on our situations and beliefs. Our understandings

of gender are dynamic, changing over time with maturity, experience, and reflection. Thus, we are active in constructing our own gender identities. The options available to us are not unlimited, however. We are influenced by the collective practices of institutions such as school, church, media and family, which construct and reinforce particular forms of masculinity and femininity.

These widely accepted, dominant notions of gender often construct masculinity and femininity as opposites, ignoring a vast array of shared human characteristics, and traditionally valuing masculinity as more powerful. Such ideas may be accepted, challenged, modified, or rejected as individuals develop and shape their gender identities. Students need the critical skills to understand and assess narrow messages about the way they can live their lives.

Adapted from Understanding Gender (retrieved February 9, 2009, from <http://education.qld.gov.au/students/advocacy/equity/gender-sch/issues/gender-under.html>)

The Social Construction of Gender

The power of the ideology of gender lies in the way it encompasses fundamental cultural and social values pertaining to the relations between men and women. The ideology of gender determines:

- What is expected of us
- What is allowed of us
- What is valued in us

The manifestation of gender difference can be found in the construction of:

- Roles (what women and men do)
- Relations (how women and men relate to each other)
- Identity (how women and men perceive themselves)

The ideology of gender thus contains norms and rules regarding appropriate behavior and determines attributes; it also reproduces a range of beliefs and customs to support these norms and social rules.

Adapted from The Social Construction of Gender (retrieved February 9, 2009, from www.hku.hk/ccpl/events/training/2003/27032003/4.doc)

Briefly jot down your response to these explanations and any questions they raise for you:

3. Focus on one of the four members of the Loman family.

Select one of the four Lomans. Describe the ways in which this character may be held hostage to social expectations of gender, and say how those expectations affect the character's actions within the play. Now, as you think about the film version of the play, how did the social construction of gender affect the actor's portrayal of the character?

ACTIVITY 19

**Getting to the Heart of the “Other”: The Postcolonial Lens
and *Heart of Darkness*****THE WHAT**

Let’s first review Steven Lynn’s formulation of the basic tenets of post-colonial theory:

Assumptions

1. Colonialism is a powerful, usually destructive historical force that shapes not only the political futures of the countries involved but also the identities of colonized and colonizing people.
2. Successful colonialism depends on a process of “Othering” the people colonized. That is, the colonized people are seen as dramatically different from and lesser than the colonizers.
3. Because of this, literature written in colonizing cultures often distorts the experiences and realities of colonized people. Literature written by colonized people often includes attempts to articulate more empowered identities and reclaim cultures in the face of colonization.

Strategies

1. Search the text for references to colonization or to currently and formerly colonized people. In these references, how are the colonized people portrayed? How is the process of colonization portrayed?
2. Consider what images of “Others” or processes of “Othering” are present in the text. How are these “Others” portrayed?
3. Analyze how the text deals with cultural conflicts between the colonizing culture and the colonized or traditional culture.

Here’s another definition of postcolonial theory:

Postcolonial literary theory attempts to isolate perspectives in literature that grow out of colonial rule and the mindset it creates. On one hand, it can examine the ways in which a colonizing society imposes its worldview on the peoples it subjugates, making them “objects” of observation and denying them the power to define themselves. The colonizers are the “subjects,” those who

take action and create realities out of the beliefs they hold to be important. On the other hand, it can focus on the experiences of colonized peoples and the disconnection they feel from their own identities. Postcolonialism also focuses on attempts of formerly colonized societies to reassert the identities they wish to claim for themselves, including national identities and cultural identities. When this lens is used to examine the products of colonization, it focuses on reclamation of self-identity.

One thing that postcolonial theory shares with deconstruction is the attempt to isolate “false binaries,” categories that function by including dominant perspectives and excluding the rest, relegating outsiders to the status of “Other.” Colonized people are always seen as existing outside the prevailing system of beliefs or values. As the dominant ideology asserts itself, it creates a sense of normalcy around the ideas of the colonizers and a sense of the exotic, the inexplicable, and the strange around the customs and ideas of the “Other.”

In your own words, what is postcolonial literary theory?

THE WHY

Here’s how one teacher explains why she teaches the postcolonial lens:

In other words, I am fully convinced that students can come to a clear understanding of the poststructuralist and gendered notions of socially-constructed subjectivity, and of postcolonial perspectives that reveal the presence of “the self” in “the other” (the master in the slave; the slave in the master), if they can find personal and cultural connections to those peoples they would otherwise perceive as antithetical to them. (Few of my mainstream American students can imagine there is any commonality, any common humanity, between themselves and “Communists” or “Arabs” or “lesbians” or “gays” or any of those groups demonized so often in our national consciousness. The task that I face in my classrooms most often is to allow students to see a hint of that common humanity, to deconstruct their preconceptions as a way to see that others, no matter how putatively different, might in circumstances and ideological convictions other than those we presently inhabit and uphold, be our colleagues, our comrades, our friends.)

From “A Pedagogy of Postcolonial Literature,” by Lindsay Penteolfe Aegerter (College Literature, 1997; retrieved February 19, 2009, from <http://www.articlearchives.com/society-social-assistance-lifestyle/ethnicity-race-racism/1045811-1.html>)

Respond to this quotation in a short paragraph.**THE HOW**

1. Rephrase from a postcolonial perspective the following sentence: Christopher Columbus discovered America.
2. Read the poem “Sure You Can Ask Me a Personal Question.” In groups of three or four, construct a postcolonial reading and explain it below.

THE TEXT

Using the table below, list all the characters you have met in *Heart of Darkness* in terms of their stance as the colonized or the colonizers.

The Colonizers	The Colonized

If it is true that the master is in the slave and the slave is in the master, select one character from each column and explain how each embodies both categories. Work with one other person on this question.

THE QUESTIONS

Using the postcolonial lens, what kind of questions emerge from your reading of this text? Write at least four questions below.

ACTIVITY 20

Contemporary Literary Theory and *Shrek*

First, consider the opening and closing minutes of the film. In what ways are we invited to read this film as a story? What are some of the assumptions about stories that you have internalized? (Some theorists call this a “story grammar.”) How do you know that the film will resist the traditional story line?

Next, let’s review the basic assumptions of the five lenses below. Fill in each square as we discuss the lenses.

	Gender Lens	Social Class Lens	Deconstruction Lens	Archetypal Lens	Reader Response Lens
What are the basic assumptions of this lens?					
List at least two episodes, moments, or incidents that seem to exemplify this perspective.					
Given this perspective, what is the film trying to say?					

View the film. Write down on a separate piece of paper particular moments that strike you. Then fit those moments under the appropriate lens if it works.

Now, with a partner, think about the messages that *Shrek* may be trying to convey. Together, discover the significance of *Shrek* from the perspective of each lens.

ACTIVITY 21

Deconstruction

Deconstruction is by far the most difficult critical lens for people to understand. It is an intellectually sophisticated theory that confuses many very smart people, but we think so much of you that we know you can understand it. It is a postmodern theory, and like most postmodernism, it questions many of the basic assumptions that have guided us in the past. In the traditional study of literature, those basic assumptions include the following:

- Language is stable and has meaning we can all agree on.
- The author is in control of the text she or he writes.
- Works of literature are internally consistent.
- Works of literature have external relevance.
- You can take the author's or poet's word for what he or she writes.
- There is a set of interpretive tools that you can reliably use to interpret a literary text.

Deconstruction calls all of these assumptions into question. It asks you to read resistantly—to not take a work of literature at its face value and to question the assumptions, both literary and philosophical, that the work or the author asks you to make. It is this kind of resistance that you folks are so good at. And it is that resistance, that ability to look beyond what seems to be intended, that will be a useful skill in the “real world.” It helps us to become careful and skeptical consumers of culture, not passive recipients of “great works.”

Deconstructionist critics ask us to probe beyond the surface, or recognizable constructs, of a finished story or text. By *construct*, we mean something that has been constructed by mental synthesis. That is, constructs are created when we combine things we know through our senses or from our experiences. They do not exist naturally; they are products of our manipulation of the order of the universe. When we reexamine and challenge the constructs employed by the literary writer, we “deconstruct.” The term does *not* simply mean to take it apart. It means we need to look thoughtfully beyond the surface of the text—to peel away like an onion the layers of constructed meanings. It doesn't mean the same thing as analyzing. In the traditional sense, when we *analyze* a piece, we put it back the way it was and appreciate it more. When we *deconstruct* a piece of literature, we realize that there is something wrong or incomplete or dishonest or unintended with how it was put together in the first place.

Here is one good explanation of deconstruction:

Having been written by a human being with unresolved conflicts and contradictory emotions, a story may disguise rather than reveal the underlying anxieties or perplexities of the author. Below the surface, unresolved tensions or contradictions may account for the true dynamics of the story. The story may have one message for the ordinary unsophisticated reader and another for the reader who responds to its subtext, its subsurface ironies. Readers who deconstruct a text will be “resistant” readers. They will not be taken in by what a story says on the surface but will try to penetrate the disguises of the text. . . . They may engage in radical rereading of familiar classics.

H. Guth and G. Rico, Discovering Literature (Prentice Hall, 1996), p. 366

Here is another useful definition:

Deconstruction is a strategy for revealing the underlayers of meaning in a text that were suppressed or assumed in order for it to take its actual form. . . . Texts are never simply unitary but include resources that run counter to their assertions and/or their authors’ intentions.

A. Appignanesi and C. Garratt (Totem Books, 1995), p. 80

We’re going to play with deconstruction today in three steps: first with some common metaphors, then with a traditional poem, and then with some texts you’ve read for this class.

1. Unpacking metaphors:

Let’s take some metaphors and see if there is anything false or unintended about their meaning. Under each, please write the obvious surface meaning, and an unintended meaning that may lie beneath the surface.

Love is a rose.

Intended

Unintended

You are the sunshine of my life.

Intended

Unintended

The test was a bear.

Intended

Unintended

2. Deconstructing a text:

Let's read the following poem, one that's often subject to traditional analysis:

Death Be Not Proud

Death be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so,
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow
Die not, poor death, nor yet canst thou kill me.
From rest and sleep, which but thy picture be,
Much pleasure, then from thee much more should flow,
And soonest our best men with thee do go,
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.
Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,
And poppy, or charms can make us sleep as well,
And better than thy stroke. Why swell'st thou then?
One short sleep passed, we wake eternally,
And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die.

—John Donne

What is the poem supposed to say? How would you approach it for, say, the AP exam? What traditional tools of analysis might you employ to unpack the meaning of the text?

Where does the poem break down? How might it work against the author's intentions? Write down some specific places where the text falls apart.

3. Reconsidering a reading:

Now, think of a poem, short story, or novel you've read that cannot be taken at face value, that may reveal, because of internal inconsistencies or unintended conflict and the failure of language to really communicate what we mean (even in the hands of gifted writers), a mixed message or an unintended meaning. On your own, or with a partner, please complete the following sentences about the text. We will ask you to detach this page from the handout and turn it in.

Name(s):

Text:

When I deconstruct this text, here's what happens. I think the main idea the author/ poet was trying to construct was:

But this construct really doesn't work. The idea falls apart. The language and construction of the text isn't able to convey what the author meant to convey. There are places in the text where it just doesn't work. For example:

So in the end, even though the author meant the work to say:

it really said:

(Optional) I'd also like to say that:

ACTIVITY 22

“On the Subway,” by Sharon Olds: The Gender Lens

1. Read the poem aloud in your group.
2. Using the theory cards, glossaries, and any other information that you have, summarize what you think it means to apply a gender lens to a text.
3. As a group, underline lines that are particularly relevant to a gendered reading.
4. As a group, complete this sentence (more than one meaning statement might result):

Using the gender lens, we think the poem means

because

5. What larger questions about society does this reading raise for you?
6. Pick a reporter to summarize your group’s findings.

ACTIVITY 23

“On the Subway,” by Sharon Olds: The Formalist/New Critical Lens

1. Read the poem aloud in your group.
2. Using the theory cards, glossaries, and any other information that you have, summarize what you think it means to apply a formalist lens to a text.
3. As a group, list some of the important poetic devices that Olds employs to convey her meaning.
4. Underline lines that contain those poetic devices.
5. As a group, complete this sentence (more than one meaning statement might result):

Based on a formalist analysis we think the poem means

because

6. What larger questions about society does this reading raise for you?
7. Pick a reporter to summarize your group’s findings.

ACTIVITY 24

“On the Subway,” by Sharon Olds: The Social-Class Lens

1. Read the poem aloud in your group.
2. Using the theory cards, glossaries, and any other information that you have, summarize what you think it means to apply a social class lens to a text.
3. As a group, underline lines that are particularly relevant to a social class reading.
4. As a group, complete this sentence (more than one meaning statement might result):

Based on a social class reading, we think the poem means

because

5. What larger questions about society does this reading raise for you?
6. Pick a reporter to summarize your group’s findings.

ACTIVITY 25

“On the Subway,” by Sharon Olds: The Reader Response Lens

1. Read the poem aloud in your group.
2. Using the theory cards, glossaries, and any other information that you have, summarize what you think it means to apply a reader response lens to a text.
3. Have each person list the personal qualities, personal experiences, or both, that are relevant to the poem.
4. Have each person underline lines that are particularly relevant to those personal experiences.
5. Have each person in the group complete the following sentence:

Based on my own reading, I think the poem means

because

6. Pick a reporter to summarize your group’s findings.

ACTIVITY 26

“Ode to Family Photographs,” by Gary Soto: Three Perspectives

The Reader Response Perspective

Reread the poem with these questions in mind, and then discuss them with three classmates:

- What family photos of your own come to mind as you read the poem?
- Who is your usual family photographer? Why?
- What might people be able to tell about your family from the photographs?

The Formalist Perspective

Reread the poem with these questions in mind, and then discuss them with three classmates:

- What are some of the images that are conjured up as you read the poem?
- In what ways is this poem different from most poems you’ve read?
- How would you describe the tone of the poem? Support your response with specific lines or phrases from the poem.

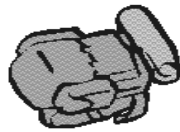
The Biographical Perspective

Read the brief biography of Gary Soto that we provided; then reread the poem with these questions in mind, and discuss them with three classmates:

- What images or specific references do the two pieces share?
- What else do the pieces seem to have in common?
- In what ways does the information in the biography affect your reading of the poem?

ACTIVITY 27

Literary Theory: Among the Things We Carry



Please consider the stories from Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* from the perspective of the four theories listed below. Each group will consider a particular lens and then we will discuss this together as a whole class. Note, too, that your paper assignment is also related to this exercise. Here is a list of the stories: "The Things They Carried," "Love," "Spin," "On the Rainy River," "Enemies," "Friends," "How to Tell a True War Story," "The Dentist," "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong," "Stockings," "Church," "The Man I Killed," "Ambush," "Style," "Speaking of Courage," "Notes," "In the Field," "Good Form," "Field Trip," "The Ghost Soldiers," "Night Life," "The Lives of the Dead."

	Reader Response	Historical	Feminist/Gender	Marxist/Social Class
Which stories lend themselves to this particular lens?				
Cite specific textual passage(s) that support this kind of reading.				
Interpret at least one character through this lens.				
If you look through this lens, what questions emerge?				
If these stories are to be considered as a coherent whole, what is the nature of the "glue" that holds them together?				
Do you believe in this reading? Why or why not?				



ACTIVITY 28

Literary Theory: A Frankenstein Monster

Please consider Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in light of the following theories. Fill out as much of the chart as you can. We'll be discussing it together as a whole class.

	Reader Response	Psychoanalytic	Feminist/Gender	Marxist/Social Class	Other?
Citation of a specific textual passage that supports this kind of reading.					
List at least two incidents that support this kind of reading.					
Interpret at least one character through this lens.					
If you look through this lens, what themes/issues emerge?					
What symbols do you see?					
Do you believe in this reading? Why or why not?					

ACTIVITY 29

Critical Encounters: Reading the World

Literary theory raises those issues which are often left submerged beneath the mass of information contained in the course, and it also asks questions about how the institution of great literature works. What makes a “great work” great? Who makes the decisions about what will be taught? Why are authors grouped into certain historical periods? The answers to fundamental questions like these are often unarticulated assumptions on the part of both the professor (teacher) and the students. . . . Socrates said that the unexamined life is not worth living. . . . Literary theory is at its best when it helps us realize what we are really doing when we study literature.

—Stephen Bonnycastle

1. On the basis of our reading and class discussions, briefly describe, in your own words, the following literary theories. Spend no more than a few minutes on this part of the exercise.

psychological criticism

feminist/gender literary theory

Marxist/social-class theory

reader response theory

other (Choose one as a group)

2. In groups of three or four, select a literary work with which you are all familiar. It could be a poem, a short story, a play, or a novel. Or focus on the novel you are currently using for your reader’s choice. Then think of two theories that would be fruitful to use to explore that text. In the spaces

below, briefly describe how each of those two theories might be used to illuminate the text.

Theory 1:

Theory 2:

3. Now think of something you've read, heard, or seen outside class that particularly struck you as worth thinking about. It could be an interaction between two people, a MTV video, a song, a film or scene from a film, a magazine article, or an ad. Briefly explain it below.
4. What lens might you use to help you understand this event or artifact? How would that lens affect or increase your understanding?
5. Can we use critical lenses to "read" the world? Explain.
6. What, if anything, do you find difficult about reading literature with critical lenses?



ACTIVITY 30

**From Reading Words to Reading the World:
Critical Lenses in Literature and in Life**



We've spent a lot of time this year focusing on critical lenses. For a culminating activity, we would like you to reflect on the ways in which you personally have made sense of the lenses as a tool for reading texts and the world.

1. Reflect on our reading and discussion over this past year. Which lenses did you find particularly useful, interesting, or thought provoking? Which lenses seemed to offer the most explanatory power for your reading of literary texts? Rate the following lenses on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is the lowest rating and 5 is the highest:

- _____ reader response theory
- _____ formalist theory (New Criticism)
- _____ archetypal theory
- _____ postcolonial theory
- _____ historical theory
- _____ psychological theory
- _____ gender theory
- _____ social-class theory

In one or two paragraphs, explain why you have ranked the lenses as you did.

2. Now think of something you've heard about or seen outside class that struck you as worth thinking about. Describe this event or issue, and explain why it is important.

It could be related to school:

- An interaction between two people at school
- A school policy
- A social group at school
- Academics
- Athletics

Or it could be something outside school

- A state, national, or world event or situation
- A political situation or event
- A family situation

Consider this event or issue through at least two of the lenses we've been working with. What do you notice or what questions emerge for you as you apply these critical perspectives? How do these lenses affect or increase your understanding of the event or issue?

3. How do you think the multiple perspectives can help you understand some things about yourself and your life outside school?

ACTIVITY 31

Waking Up to *The Awakening*; or, What's Gender Got to Do with It?

Divide into gender-specific groups. Then respond to the following questions.

1. What kinds of relationships between men and women are portrayed in the novel? On the basis of those portraits, what kinds of generalizations can we make about the relationships between men and women that we see, especially about marriage?
2. Write a few sentences about how Robert is portrayed. Think about his physical description, his behavior, and his power or lack of it. What kinds of words are used to describe him? Be specific.
3. Write a few sentences about how Edna is portrayed. Think about her physical description, her behavior, and her power or lack of it. What kinds of words are used to describe her? Be specific.
4. In a sentence or two, summarize your current understanding of what it means to read a novel with a feminist lens.
5. From what you've read so far in *The Awakening* select a passage where reading with a feminist/gender lens proved useful or natural.

Page(s) on which the passage appears:

6. How does being a female or male affect your reading of the novel? How might the opposite sex approach this novel differently?

WARNING!!!

IF YOU'VE ALREADY FINISHED THE NOVEL OR KNOW HOW IT ENDS, PLEASE EXCUSE YOURSELF FROM THE DISCUSSION NOW. WE MEAN IT!

7. Predict how the novel will end. Support your hypothesis with a reasonable argument and textual evidence.

We'll now reconvene as a whole class and compare our answers.

ACTIVITY 32

Theory Relay: Perspectives on *Native Son*

For the next hour, in groups of three or four, consider *Native Son* from a variety of theoretical perspectives: historical and biographical, reader response, Marxist/social class, and feminist/gender. We'll be doing this as a kind of relay. There are four theory stations around the room. Spend approximately 10 minutes at each station. Each person should turn in one of these sheets to his or her teacher on Monday. Make certain you've completed the journal entry at the end of the sheet.

Name:

Group Members:

Reader Response Station

Reread the explanation of reader response and study your reader response diagram. In the space below, write at least three meaning statements that are the result of your personal interaction with the text.

1.

2.

3.

Historical and Biographical Station

Skim together "How Bigger Was Born" (in your copy of *Native Son*), and skim the biographical articles that you find at this station. How does what you've learned, as well as any additional experience of reading you've had with other works of Richard Wright, affect and inform your understanding of *Native Son*?

Feminist/Gender Station

Consider the quotation you find at the feminist/gender station. As a group, construct an interpretation of the quotation that is informed by your collective understanding of feminist literary theory. When you consider *Native Son* from a feminist perspective, which characters, incidents, or themes are brought into greater relief? Write your response below.

Marxist/Social-Class Station

Consider the quotation you find at the Marxist/social-class station. As a group, construct an interpretation of the quotation that is informed by your understanding of Marxist literary theory. When you consider *Native Son* from a Marxist perspective, what characters, incidents, or themes are brought into greater relief? Write your response below.

Journal Entry

Reflect on your group's efforts to read *Native Son* through a variety of critical lenses. Which lens seemed to be most consistent with the intention of the novel? Which lens was the most difficult to apply? Which was the most informative? This entry should be at least two full paragraphs. Write it on a separate piece of paper, and attach it to this sheet.

ACTIVITY 33

Reader Response and (Text)

Context

(What factors surrounding my reading of the text are influencing my response?)



(What personal qualities or events relevant to this particular book might influence my response?)

(What textual features might influence my response?)

Context

ACTIVITY 34

Looking Through Lenses: Our First Look

Group Members:

Summer Reading Text:

1. In three or four sentences please summarize the plot of the book.
2. What were some of the most important things you noticed about the text before we read our discussion of lenses?
3. Which two lenses do you think might be most useful to apply to this text?
4. Which lenses do you think might not be particularly useful? Why?
5. Now try applying the two lenses that you selected in #3.

Lens 1

When we viewed this book through the _____ lens, we looked at:

The lens helps us see the following things that we didn't notice before:

Therefore, we see that this might be a book about:

Lens 2

When we viewed this book through the _____ lens, we looked at:

The lens helps us see the following things that we didn't notice before:

Therefore we see that this might be a book about:

*** * * Journal Entry * * * Journal Entry * * * Journal Entry * * ***

Reflecting on the above, write an entry in your journal summarizing what you discovered from this activity. What worked, what went “clunk”?

What were the most and least useful elements of this first application of critical lenses?