

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 6

Literary Theory Cards

Gender Criticism*Assumptions*

1. The work doesn't have an objective status, an autonomy; instead, any reading of it is influenced by the reader's own status, which includes gender, or attitudes toward gender.
2. In the production of literature and within stories themselves, men and women have not had equal access.
3. Men and women are different: They write differently, read differently, and write about their reading differently. These differences should be valued.

Strategies

1. Consider the gender of the author or 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. Look at the effects of power drawn from gender within the plot or form.

Social Power/Marxist Criticism*Assumptions*

1. Karl Marx argued that the way people think and behave in any society is determined by basic economic factors.
2. In his view, those groups of people who owned and controlled major industries could exploit the rest of the population, through conditions of employment and by forcing their own values and beliefs onto other social groups.
3. Marxist criticism applies these arguments to the study of literary texts.

Strategies

1. Explore the way different groups of people are represented in texts. Evaluate the level of social realism in the text and how society is portrayed.
2. Consider how the text itself is a commodity that reproduces certain social beliefs and practices. Analyze the social effect of the literary work.
3. Look at the effects of power drawn from economic or social class.

(continued overleaf)

Biographical Criticism

Assumptions

1. 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.
2. The context for a literary work includes information about the author, his or her historical moment, and the systems of meaning available at the time of writing.
3. Interpretation of the work should be based on an understanding of its context. That context can provide insight into themes, historical references, social oppositions or movements, and the creation of fictional characters.

Strategies

1. Research the author's life, and relate that information to the work.
2. Research the author's time (the political history, intellectual history, economic history, and so on), and relate that information to the work.
3. Research the systems of meaning available to the author, and relate those systems to the work.

Archetypal Criticism

Assumptions

1. Meaning cannot exist solely on the page of a work, nor can that work be treated as an independent entity.
2. Humankind has a "collective unconscious," a kind of universal psyche, which is manifested in dreams and myths and which harbors themes and images that are hard-wired in all of us.
3. These recurring myths, symbols, and character types appear and reappear in literary works.

Strategies

1. Consider the genre of the work (e.g., comedy, romance, tragedy, irony) and how it affects the meaning.
2. Look for story patterns and symbolic associations, such as black hats, springtime settings, evil stepmothers, and so forth, from other texts you've read.
3. Consider your associations with these symbols as you construct meaning from the text.

Reader Response Criticism

Assumptions

1. An author's intentions are not reliably available to readers; all they have is the text.
2. Out of the text, readers actively and personally make meaning.
3. Responding to a text is a process, and descriptions of that process are valuable.

Strategies

1. Move through the text in super-slow motion, describing the response of an informed reader at various points.
2. Or describe your own response when moving through the text.
3. React to the text as a whole, embracing and expressing the subjective and personal response it engenders.

Formalist Criticism

Assumptions

1. The critic's interest ultimately should be focused on the work itself (not on the author's intention or the reader's response).
2. The formalist perspective pays particular attention to issues of form and convention.
3. The formalist perspective says that a literary work should be treated as an independent and self-sufficient object.

Strategies

1. Read closely. You can assume that every aspect is carefully calculated to contribute to the work's unity—figures of speech, point of view, diction, recurrent ideas or events, everything.
2. The methods used in this perspective are those of close reading: 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.
3. Say how the work is unified: how the various elements work to unify it.

Historical Criticism

Assumptions

1. When reading a text, you have to place it within its historical context.
2. *Historical* refers to the social, political, economic, cultural, and intellectual climate of the time.
3. 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.

Strategies

1. Research the fundamental historical events of the period in which the author wrote.
2. Consider the fundamental historical events of the period in which the literary work is set if it is different from the period in which the author wrote.
3. View the text as part of a larger context of historical movements, and consider how it both contributes to and reflects certain fundamental aspects of human history.

Postcolonial Criticism

Assumptions

1. Colonialism is a powerful, often 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.

Structuralist Criticism*Assumptions*

1. Draws on linguistic theory.
2. There are structural relationships between concepts that are revealed in language.
3. Linguistic *signs* are composed of two parts—the *signifier* (sound patterns) and the *signified* (the concept or meaning of the word).
4. Through these relationships, meaning is produced, which frames and motivates the actions of individuals and groups.

Strategies

1. Focus on the text alone, not on external information.
2. Examine the underlying *system*, or patterns of language. By examining the pattern of linguistic signs, we can establish the paradigm that will reveal meaning.
3. Identify and analyze contrasting elements, (binary oppositions) to determine the important elements in the text.
4. Look at structural elements, such as words, stanzas, chapters, or parts, and at characters, narrators, or speakers to see how they can reveal important contrasts and differences.
5. What system of relationships governs the work as a whole or links this work to others?

Deconstructionist Criticism*Assumptions*

1. Meaning is made by binary oppositions, but one item is unavoidably favored (or “privileged”) over the other.
2. This hierarchy is probably arbitrary and can be exposed and reversed.
3. The text’s oppositions and hierarchy can be called into question because texts contain within themselves unavoidable contradictions, gaps, spaces, and absences that defeat closure and determinate meaning. All reading is misreading.

Strategies

1. Identify the oppositions in the text. Determine which member appears to be favored, and look for evidence that contradicts that favoring.
2. Identify what appears central to the text and what appears to be marginal and excluded.
3. Expose the text’s indeterminacy. Whereas formalism assumes that you should read a literary work closely as if it made sense, deconstruction assumes the opposite: that if you read closely enough, the text will fail to make sense—or at least will contradict itself.

Psychological Criticism*Assumptions*

1. Creative writing (like dreaming) represents the (disguised) fulfillment of a (repressed) wish or fear.
2. Everyone’s formative history is different in its particulars, but there are basic recurrent patterns of development for most people. These particulars and patterns have lasting effects.
3. In reading literature, we can make educated guesses about what has been repressed and transformed.

Strategies

1. Attempt to apply a developmental concept to the work, or to the author or characters (e.g., the Oedipus complex, anal retentiveness, castration anxiety, gender confusion).
2. Relate the work to psychologically significant events in the author’s or a character’s life.
3. Consider how repressed material may be expressed in the work’s pattern of imagery or symbols.

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