

## Choosing Critical Lenses

Remember that the way we read is a *choice*; the interpretation of a text depends on active, conscious decisions on the part of the reader.

Here are some hints to remember when you are sorting through your critical lenses.

1. The lenses are not always mutually exclusive, but you should be aware which are incompatible by understanding the assumptions behind them.
2. No single lens gives the clearest view; all have limitations.
3. Applying different lenses to the same text can reveal new features of that text.
4. It is easier for novices to apply one lens at a time.
5. These descriptions are simplified; many lenses are based on years of scholarly research and debate.
6. Turning these lenses on your experiences—your life—can help you understand and think critically about your own ideologies.
7. Writing about literature and art affords us the ability to discuss real ideas in the realm of imagination; in other words, we can *play*.

## New Historicism Lens

**Essential Question:** What are the ways in which our understanding of literature and its historical context change over time?

**Central Concerns:** history as interpretation and cultural construction, literature as dynamic, meaning changes over time

**Critical Assumptions:**

1. Meaning is contextual.
2. There are divergent viewpoints on the nature of a historical context.
3. History is subjective.
4. Interpretation is a kind of cultural production, marked by a particular context; we cannot look at history objectively, as we too interpret events as a product of our culture and our time.

**What to do:**

1. Learn about the systems of meaning that were available to the author at the time the work was produced.
2. Consider the ways in which cultural concepts change over time.
3. List the ways in which contemporary events, assumptions and perspectives might shape one's reading of the literary texts.
4. Imagine the ways in which literary works influence reconsiderations of history.

## Gender/ [REDACTED]

**Essential Question:** How does this text reinforce, critique, or challenge definitions of masculinity or femininity?

**Central Concerns:** gender roles, objectivity/objectification, representation, differences

**Critical Assumptions:**

1. Any text cannot exist outside of a gender frame of reference.
2. Historically, writing (and interpretation) has been dominated by men and masculine perceptions; it is important for women to create a feminine/feminist way of writing and reading.
3. Men and women are essentially different, and differences can be examined in social behavior, ideas, and values; these differences should be recognized.
4. Stereotyping is dangerous and can lead to destructive social norms.

**What to do:**

1. Consider the gender of the author, the reader, and the characters/voices in the text: how does the text reflect social gender codes?
2. Ask how the text reinforces or undermines gender stereotypes.
3. Imagine yourself as someone of the opposite gender reading this work.

## Social Power/ [REDACTED]

**Essential Question:** How does this text comment on or represent class conflict?

**Central Concerns:** power, economics, class, differences, fairness, society

**Critical Assumptions:**

1. The way people think and behave is determined by basic economic factors.
2. Class conflict is the same as political conflict.
3. The wealthy class exploits the working class by forcing their own values and beliefs upon them, usually through control of working conditions and money.
4. These ideas can be applied to the study of literature, which is a product of culture and social conflict.

**What to do:**

1. Explore the way different economic classes are represented in the text.
2. Determine the ideological stance of the text. (Is it radical? Conservative?)
3. Link the text to the social class of its author.
4. Consider how the text itself is a commodity that reproduces certain beliefs and behaviors. What is the effect of the work as means of control?

## Reader-Response Lens

**Essential Question:** How does this text reflect the experience, beliefs, and understandings of its reader?

**Central Concerns:** effect, personal reflection, description, subjectivity

**Critical Assumptions:**

1. The text does not exist without a reader.
2. An author's intentions are unavailable to a reader outside the text.
3. Reading is the active process of evaluating a personal response to a text.
4. A reader's changing perceptions that result from reading are valuable.

**What to do:**

1. Move through the text carefully and slowly, describing the response of an informed reader at various points; note changes in response.
2. Describe your own responses to the text, using evidence and explanation.
3. React to the text as a whole, expressing the subjective and personal response it engenders.

## Postcolonial Lens

**Essential Question:** How does this text comment on, represent, or repress the marginalized voices?

**Central Concerns:** cultural markers, the Other, oppression, justice, society

**Critical Assumptions:**

1. Colonization—the exploitation of one national or ethnic group by another—is a powerful destructive force that disrupts the identities of both groups.
2. Colonized societies are forced to the margins by their colonizers (called “Othering”), despite having a historical claim to the land they inhabit.
3. Literature written by colonizers distorts the experiences and realities of the colonized; literature written by the colonized often attempts to redefine or preserve a sense of cultural identity.

**What to do:**

1. Explore how the text represents a colonized or colonized cultural group.
2. Ask how the text creates images of “others.” How does it demonstrate a colonial mindset?
3. Ask how conflicts in the text might be viewed as cultural conflicts.



## Literary Theories: A Sampling of Critical Lenses

Literary theories were developed as a means to understand the various ways people read texts. The proponents of each theory believe 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 “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.

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***New Historicism.*** New historicism asks us to consider literature in a wider historical context than does traditional historicism. Unlike traditional historicism, new historicism asserts that our understanding of history itself is a result of subjective interpretation, rather than a linear objective set of events. New historicists also believe that it is not simply enough to understand the sociocultural and historical contexts in which a piece of literature was written; we must also consider how our own place and time in history affects our interpretations, since we bring to a text some perceptions, assumptions and beliefs that were not at play when the text was written. For example, the questions that we ask about how women are portrayed in Shakespeare’s plays are shaped by contemporary feminist thought and the changes that women’s roles in society have undergone in the intervening centuries since Shakespeare’s era. New historicism then tells us that literature is influenced by history and that our historical understanding is also influenced by literature. The author, the reader and the critic are all influenced by our own cultural and historical location, and our understanding of, and appreciation for, particular texts will change over time.

Other theories we’ll be discussing in class include:

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**Gender Criticism:** A feminist critic sees cultural and economic disabilities in a patriarchal society that have hindered or prevented women from realizing their creative possibilities and women's cultural identification is as a merely negative object, or "Other" to man as 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 also pervades those writings which have been considered great literature. Such works lack autonomous female role models, are implicitly addressed to male readers, and leave the woman reader an alien outsider or else solicit her to identify against herself by assuming male values and ways of perceiving. Feeling and acting.

This 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 upon her looks.

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

- 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.
- 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.
- 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 in any era by revealing the economic, class, and ideological determinants of the way an author writes, and to examine 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 their 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 numerous descriptions you get of land, wealth, and hearty living through Ichabod's eyes.







## Literary Perspectives Toolkit

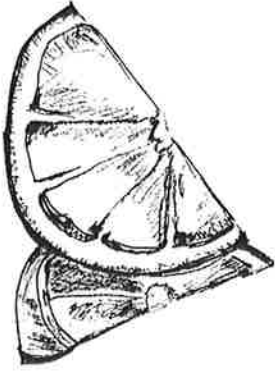
Literary perspectives help us explain why people might interpret the same text in a variety of ways. Perspectives help us understand what is important to individual readers, and they show us why those readers end up seeing what they see. One way to imagine a literary perspective is to think of it as 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 seeing something intriguing and unexpected. While readers typically apply more than one perspective at a time, the best way to understand these perspectives is to use 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.

**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. By 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—including 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 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 upon 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.



ACTIVITY 9

## Upon Seeing an Orange



Gender theory asks

Can a woman and a man equally partake of this orange?  
What possibilities are available to a woman who eats this orange? A man?

Formalism asks

What shape and diameter is the orange?  
How does the shape of the orange affect its taste?

Social class theory asks

Who does the orange belong to?  
Who can afford oranges? Who can't?

Postcolonialism asks

Who did the orange used to belong to?  
Who has it now?  
Who took the orange away?

Reader-response asks

What are some experiences we have eating oranges?  
What does the orange taste like?  
What does the orange remind us of?

Deconstruction asks

In orange juice, what orangeness remains?  
If there are "oranges" and "non-oranges," which is a tangerine?

*Source:* Adapted from [www.geocities.com/litcrittoolkit/defin.html](http://www.geocities.com/litcrittoolkit/defin.html)

