**Literary Theories**

What is a literary theory? Literary theories try to explain literary works to us and answer questions like “What drives people to act the way that they do?”

There are many literary theories, and each theoretical lens has the ability to alter the way we perceive ourselves and even our world. Therefore, gaining an overview of critical theories enlarges our understanding not only of literary works, but also of the human experience in general.

Hypothetically, every literary work can be interpreted using any theory, however, most works lend themselves more readily to some theories more than others. Attempt to read a text using one theory may be a relatively pointless endeavor that risks distorting elements of the text, the theory, or both, as we try to make them fit each other.

For now, read through the literary theories listed below and see which one might best fit with the work of literature you want to analyze.

**Psychoanalytic Theory**

**Main Concept:** Based on the psychoanalytic principles established by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), the psychoanalytic theory says that our childhood experiences and unconscious desires are one of the main influences on our behavior.

When we look at the world through a psychoanalytic lens, we see that it is comprised of individual human beings, each with a psychological history that begins with childhood experiences and continues on into adolescence, then again into adulthood.

With this in mind, we can then ask ourselves the following types of questions:

* Is it possible to relate a character’s patterns of adult behavior to early experiences in the family as represented in the story?
* How do these patterns of behavior and family dynamics operate and what do they reveal?

These types of questions can reveal how many characters' actions may stem from their personal experiences and potentially even their unconscious mind. Such unconscious feelings might consist of repressed wounds, fears, unresolved conflicts, guilty desires, and fear of or fascination with death or sexuality.

**Marxist Theory**

**Main Concept:** Based on the principles established by Karl Marx (1818-1883), Marxism focuses on the socioeconomic considerations that underlie human behavior and is largely a response to social injustice.

According to Marxist Theory, getting and keeping economic power is the motive behind all social and political activities, including education, religion, government, the arts, science, technology, the media, and so on.

With this in mind, we can then ask ourselves the following types of questions:

* How might the work be seen as a critique of capitalism, imperialism, or classism? That is, in what ways does the text reveal, and invite us to condemn, oppressive socioeconomic forces (including repressive ideologies)?
* Does the work of literature reinforce (intentionally or not) capitalist, imperialist, or classist values?
* How does the literary work reflect (intentionally or not) the socioeconomic conditions of the time in which it was written and/or the time in which it is set, and what do those conditions reveal about the history of class struggle?

The *bourgeoisie* are those who control the world’s natural, economic, and human resources and the *proletariat* are the majority of the global population who live in substandard conditions and who have always performed the manual labor—the mining, the factory work, the ditch digging, the railroad building—that allows the rich to get richer.

**Feminist Theory**

**Main Concept:** Feminist criticism examines the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforces or undermines the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women. In short, Feminist Theory acknowledges that gender issues play a part in every aspect of human production and experience, including the production and experience of literature, whether we are consciously aware of these issues or not.

In every domain where patriarchy reigns, woman is other: she is objectified and marginalized, defined only by her difference from male norms and values, defined by what she (allegedly) lacks and that men (allegedly) have.

All feminist activity, including feminist theory and literary criticism, has as its ultimate goal to change the world by promoting women’s equality. Although frequently falsely portrayed in opposition to “family values,” feminists continue to lead the struggle for better family policies such as nutrition and health care for mothers and children; parental leave; and high-quality, affordable day care.

With this in mind, we can then ask ourselves the following types of questions:

* What does the work of literature reveal about the operations (economically, politically, socially, or psychologically) of patriarchy? How are women portrayed? How do these portrayals relate to the gender issues of the period in which the novel was written or is set? In other words, does the work reinforce or undermine patriarchal ideology?
* How is the work “gendered”? That is, how does it seem to define femininity and masculinity? Do the characters’ behavior always conform to their assigned genders? Does the work suggest that there are genders other than feminine and masculine? What seems to be the work’s attitude toward the gender(s) it portrays? For example, does the work seem to accept, question, or reject the traditional view of gender?

To briefly illustrate the debilitating effects of patriarchal gender roles on both women and men, consider the story of “Cinderella.” Feminists have long been aware that the role of Cinderella, which patriarchy imposes on the imagination of young girls, is a destructive role because it equates femininity with submission, encouraging women to tolerate familial abuse, wait patiently to be rescued by a man, and view marriage as the only desirable reward for “right” conduct. By the same token, however, the role of Prince Charming—which requires men to be wealthy rescuers responsible for making their women happy “ever after”—is a destructive role for men because it promotes the belief that men must be providers without emotional needs.

**A BRIEF RECAP**

**Psychoanalytic Criticism**—How is the text shaped by its (intentional or unintentional) representation of the psychological desires, needs, and conflicts of its characters (or the psychological desires, needs, and conflicts of its author)?

**Marxist Criticism**—How is the text shaped by its (intentional or unintentional) representation of capitalism and/or classism? Does this representation support or undermine these oppressive socioeconomic ideologies?

**Feminist Criticism**—How is the text shaped by its (intentional or unintentional) representation of patriarchal norms and values? Does this representation support or undermine these oppressive norms and values?

All information on this handout sourced and adapted from:

Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide.* 2nd ed., Routledge, 2006.