

Literary Lenses: Feminist, Queer, Marxist, & Postcolonial Theories

This handout will provide a brief overview of the Feminist, Queer, Marxist, and Postcolonial Literary Theories, continuing our introductory survey of literary lenses. Overall, these theories represent more niche literary focal points than the foundational three we covered previously: New Criticism, New Historicism, and Reader Response theory. (See the previous handout in this series, [Literary Lenses for Analysis and Discussion](#).) However, all these theories interrogate the works we interpret, asking questions and inviting discussion about identity, prejudice, and oppression. You may use one, some, or all these lenses to further your analysis, ask great discussion questions, and ultimately, see literature from different perspectives and not limit yourself to a singular train of thought.

What is literature?

Before diving into analysis, we should understand what we are analyzing. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, literature can be defined as “printed [i.e., written] matter of any kind,” “a body of writings on a particular subject,” or “the principal classical texts associated with... learning; culture, scholarship” (OED). The authors of the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* provide a more philosophical definition: “literature represents life; it holds up, as it were, a mirror to nature and is thus ‘mimetic’” (Leitch et al. 4). *Encyclopedia Britannica* offers more of a balance between the two: “imaginative works of poetry and prose distinguished by the intentions of their authors and the perceived aesthetic excellence of their execution” (Rexroth). Literature is a form of artistic expression, including written works such as poetry, novels, drama, and essays, and is characterized as ‘good’ or ‘the best.’ What makes some literature ‘the best’? Scholars still debate that topic today.

First Theory: What is Feminist Literary Theory?

Feminist criticism aims to investigate women’s roles across the literary canon and to identify and challenge pervasive themes and messages related to patriarchy. To add a disclaimer, there is no single feminist literary criticism, but their family tends to investigate similar key ideas.

Key Ideas: Feminist Literary Theory

From the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, feminist literary theory tends to focus on “exposing masculinist stereotypes, distortions, and omissions in male-dominated literature; studying female creativity, genres, styles, themes, and literary traditions; discovering and evaluating lost and neglected literary works by women...” and ultimately, “examining the forces that shape women’s lives... across psychology and politics, biology and cultural history; and creating new ideas of and roles for women” (Leitch et al. 24).

Sample Key Concept: The Male Gaze

Coined by British film critic Laura Mulvey in her 1975 book *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, the male gaze describes how literature, film, and art often portray women from a masculine, heterosexual perspective, positioning women as objects to be looked at rather than as full subjects with agency (Leitch et al. 2088). Mulvey calls Feminist critics to action, urging them to interrogate how women are represented and who controls the perspective.

Sample Feminist Literary Analysis: Jane Eyre

Example: *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë is considered a foundational work of feminist literature through the philosophical digressions of its pragmatic heroine. From a surface-level perspective, the work itself appears to be a product of its time, perpetuating patriarchal stereotypes to female readers. From the woman in the attic to the novel's most famous line, "Reader, I married him," *Jane Eyre* presents a world where women must be obedient, submissive, and ultimately, marry their masters. However, upon closer inspection, the reader understands the profound agency that Jane holds in her life and in this patriarchal world: leaving the household when her lover, Mr. Rochester, betrays her trust, and agreeing to marry him only after he has lost his power, status, and even body parts, leaving her standing tall above him.

Discussion: Feminist Literary Theory

To think like a Feminist critic, examine gender roles and stereotypes within a text and how they are represented or critiqued.

- In what scenes of the novel does Jane resist being objectified or controlled, and what strategies does she use?
- What contrasts exist in the text between Jane Eyre and Bertha Mason outside of their relationships with Mr. Rochester?
- How does Charlotte Brontë represent marriage as both a constraint and an opportunity?

Further Reading: Feminist Literary Theory

Key authors and works to learn more about Feminist Literary Theory are Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, and Laura Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*.

Second Theory: What is Queer Literary Theory?

Often paired with Feminist Literary Theory in Gender Studies, Queer Literary Theory closely examines gender and sexuality in literature. Building on Feminist Literary Theory, the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia* notes that as "feminist epistemology asks whose knowledge matters and who creates knowledge, queer theory asks whether knowledge matters and whether naturalized knowledge is constructed" (Acadia). From the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, "throughout the history of literature, there have been many queer writers, literary characters, and themes. One of the priorities of queer theory and criticism is to recover this literature and its traditions through scholarship and teaching" (Leitch et al. 26). Ultimately, Queer Literary

Theorists argue that there have always been queer writers, but their job is to identify the ideas those writers expressed and to challenge the societal mechanisms that may have silenced or intimidated them.

Key Ideas: Queer Literary Theory

By studying literature and rhetoric, action and activism, Queer Theory is focused on attacking the homophobic and patriarchal basis of heterosexuality, aiming beyond lesbian and gay rights philosophies to provide a voice and area of “study of other so-called perverse, deviant, and alternative sexualities” (Leitch et al. 26). The *Oxford Research Encyclopedia* adds that the “activist roots of queer theory in the 1969 Stonewall Riots place drag, trans issues, class, race, violence, gender, and sexuality at the heart of queer theorizing” (Acadia).

Sample Key Concept: Heteronormativity

Coined by Michael Warner in his introduction, “Fear of a Queer Planet,” to *Social Text* in 1991, heteronormativity refers to the cultural assumption that heterosexuality is natural, normal, and universal, and that gender fits neatly into male/female binaries (Leitch et al. 2957). Queer Theory critics ask what assumptions about sexuality and gender shape the text.

Sample Queer Literary Analysis: The Odyssey

Example: In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus is not represented as the pinnacle of traditional masculinity. In the *Iliad*, that image belongs to other heroes: Achilles, Hector, and Ajax, who each embody masculine traits such as strength, honor, and dominance. Odysseus, however, is defined by cunning and deception, and he relies on his intelligence rather than physical strength or dominance. In the *Odyssey*, he also forms intense bonds with his male companions; relationships marked by loyalty, grief, and their shared struggle. Yet despite the emotional weight of these connections, the poem ultimately frames the heterosexual reunion between Odysseus and his wife, Penelope, as the proper and necessary conclusion. Therefore, Homer’s *Odyssey* reinforces a heteronormative ideal, positioning marriage between a man and a woman as the correct, satisfying conclusion, even though the narrative dedicates little time to exploring Odysseus and Penelope’s relationship, as well as the fact that Odysseus is no ordinary man.

Discussion: Queer Literary Theory

To think like a Queer Literary Theorist, investigate sexuality and heteronormative conventions that appear in texts and what representation exists of humanity’s diversity beyond binaries.

- What is the impact of the complete loss of Odysseus’ same-sex bonds with his crew, and when the hero reunites with his wife, does the crew’s disappearance reinforce the story’s heteronormative ending?
- Does Athena’s fluidity (represented through her often-male disguises) challenge gender norms or ultimately reinforce them?
- How are Homer’s characters who disrupt social and sexual norms (i.e., the suitors, Odysseus’ disloyal slaves) punished, and what does that reveal about the poem’s values?

Further Reading: Queer Literary Theory

Key authors and works to learn more about Queer Literary Theory are Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner's essay "Sex in Public," Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, and Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*.

Third Theory: What is Marxist Literary Theory?

Since the *Epic of Gilgamesh*—the world's oldest known narrative—stories have depicted people and their social classes throughout history. But, as the *Norton Anthology* states, "with the spread and maturation of capitalism through its various stages... many of the current concepts, terms, and issues related to social class derive from Marxist criticism" (Leitch et al. 13). Marxist Literary Theorists need not be champions of Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto*; really, they notice how literature represents, challenges, or perpetuates class struggle and socioeconomic ideas.

Key Ideas: Marxist Literary Theory

From the ancient era's tyrannical kings, oppressed slaves, and heroic shepherds to the modern era's overworked factory workers, business tycoons, and corrupt politicians, characters inhabit societal roles with varying levels of power. Marxist critics examine how belief systems and ideologies justify power structures, and how the things we create—art, culture, even people—can become commodities to be bought and sold.

Sample Key Concept: Class Struggle and Class Consciousness

Literature can reinforce or challenge the economic power structures of society. Marxist critics ask how texts reflect or hide class inequality. *Encyclopedia Britannica* defines class consciousness as "the self-understanding of members of a social class" (Munro). Marx and Engels never used the term, but they did intend that there is a moment when members of the working class, the proletariat, realize their situation and their grievances against the bourgeoisie. However, further, in his essay "Class Consciousness," Marxist Theorist György Lukács writes that the concept itself "implies a class-conditioned unconsciousness of one's own socio-historical and economic condition" (Lukács). To Lukács, what is more important is identifying the forces at play that keep characters and people unaware and oppressed.

Sample Marxist Literary Analysis: *The Great Gatsby*

Example: Critics and readers champion F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* as the pinnacle of the Great American novel among other contestants such as Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird*, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, and Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*. However, new readers may be surprised to discover that Fitzgerald's novel provides a scathing depiction of American capitalism filled with alcoholism, loneliness, and neglect. The characters Jay Gatsby and Daisy Buchanan each represent an example of class consciousness, being aware of one's standing in class struggle. However, each represents a different action taken once class consciousness is achieved. Gatsby, in love, though aware of the social-class difference between

him and Daisy, aims to climb the social ladder and achieve the American Dream. Daisy, however, realizes her standing as an intelligent woman in a social class that does not value that trait, by wishing for her daughter to be “a fool—that’s the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool” (Fitzgerald 17). Both characters understand their place in society; while Gatsby aims to climb higher, Daisy aims to conform to what is expected of her.

Discussion: Marxist Literary Theory

To think like a Marxist critic, consider asking questions about class struggle, materialism, labor, economics, and the commodification of the human experience.

- Which characters does Fitzgerald paint as ‘new money’ and ‘old money’ at Gatsby’s parties, and which details lead the reader to those conclusions?
- Is the illusion of the American Dream why American schools and readers see *The Great Gatsby* as a great American novel? Is there something inherently American in questioning our own ideologies?
- In *The Great Gatsby*, how are human beings, such as Daisy, viewed as status symbols by characters like Tom or Gatsby?

Further Reading: Marxist Literary Theory

Key authors and works to learn more about Marxist Literary Theory are Gyorgy Lukacs’ essays in *History and Class Consciousness*, as well as “Commodities” and “The Working Day,” which are selections from Karl Marx’s *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*.

Fourth Theory: What is Postcolonial Literary Theory?

While Feminist, Queer, and Marxist Literary Theories investigate how patriarchal stereotypes, gender binaries, and class struggle influence literature or are perpetuated by its authors, Postcolonial Literary Theory is interested in the impact, intimidation, and interpretation that arise in written works amongst colonization and empires.

Key Ideas: Postcolonial Literary Theory

The authors of the *Norton Anthology* explain that Postcolonial Literary Theory “aims to describe the mechanisms of colonial power, to recover excluded or marginalized ‘subaltern’ voices, and to theorize the complexities of colonial, neocolonial, and postcolonial identity; national belonging; and globalization” (Leitch et al. 27).

Sample Key Concept: The Other

Colonial discourse constructs colonized peoples as “the Other”—exotic, primitive, irrational, or inferior—in contrast to the supposedly civilized colonizer. Essentially, it is a form of the divisive ideology of ‘us vs. them.’ When it comes to literature, Postcolonial critics argue that this pervasive stereotyping exists throughout “anthropological, historical, and literary texts as well as mass media such as newspapers, television, and the Internet” (Leitch et al. 27). Postcolonial critics are also interested in the idea that colonized societies eventually create “a class of colonial subjects burdened by a double consciousness and divided loyalties” (Leitch et al. 28).

Sample Postcolonial Literary Analysis: Things Fall Apart

Example: When viewing Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* with a postcolonial lens, readers might focus more on Okonkwo's tragic downfall as a respected member of his village when new colonial powers upend the Igbo people's power structure. However, Achebe also presents a compelling moment of double consciousness when Okonkwo's son, Nwoye, becomes a Christian, thereby withdrawing from Igbo tradition. Rather than inheriting his father's ambition, Nwoye exhibits a deep desire for belonging and meaning, which draws him toward the missionaries' teachings. Achebe depicts a son emotionally and culturally distancing himself from his father, recognizing the branching path before him in colonial society, where individuals may distance themselves from their culture to assimilate and access new opportunities.

Discussion: Postcolonial Literary Theory

To think like a Postcolonial critic, consider representations of different cultures and ethnic groups, and examine the lives of people who live between multiple groups. Additionally, look for the pervasive ideologies from colonial powers that linger in literary works.

- How does Achebe illustrate Igbo society as a counter to stereotypical depictions of precolonial African society?
- When the colonists arrive, how do different generations of the Igbo react (the elders, Okonkwo, and Nwoye)?
- Which characters are treated as insiders and which are outsiders, and how do they navigate those roles?

Further Reading: Postcolonial Literary Theory

Key authors and works to learn more about Postcolonial Literary Theory are Edward Said's *Orientalism* and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak?*

Activity: Which Type of Analysis Is Being Used?

The following page will include analyses from two different papers on classic novels. As you grow more familiar with these new literary theories and their surrounding arguments, focal points, and areas of analysis, let's see if you can identify them. On a separate sheet of paper, write down the theory you think best fits with the piece of analysis, and highlight or underline key terms or phrases that lead you to that conclusion.

Analysis #1: *Candide* by Voltaire

Pangloss, the titular protagonist's teacher and companion in Voltaire's *Candide*, acts as the ultimate ideologue, a representative of a harmful ideology: optimism. Optimism is the ideology that Voltaire focuses on and critiques throughout the novella; as an Enlightenment precursor work to the uprisings in the French Revolution, *Candide* questions whether everything that happens is for the best, or, as Pangloss puts it, that the characters live in the "best of all possible worlds" (Voltaire 3). In a rigid, class-based society like 18th-century France, this sense of 'optimism', akin to contemporary ideologies such as fatalism, constitutes a form of class

unconsciousness, perpetuated spiritually and socially by the Church and State to prevent the lower classes from revolting against their material conditions.

Analysis #2: The Catcher in the Rye by J. D. Salinger

In *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden Caulfield, despite his hatred of ‘phonies,’ often falls into similar misogynistic habits associated with the characters he criticizes, such as Ackley and Stradlater. One notable example of this is the male gaze. Within his internal monologue, Caulfield often refers to other men as ‘bastards’ and ‘perverts,’ but he objectifies nearly every female character he encounters within the story or references from his past. While he may view himself as a benevolent protector of innocence, his own thoughts are far from innocent, from descriptions of Sally Hayes’ ice-skating skirt to his thoughts on Ernest Morrow’s mother on the train, “She looked nice, smoking... She had a lot of sex appeal, too, if you really want to know” (Salinger 31). Yet, Caulfield’s views are somewhat redeemed by the end of the novel through his final interactions with his little sister, Phoebe.

Answer Key: Which analyses are these?

- 1) Marxist
- 2) Feminist

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