

## Critical Lenses and Theory

### Approach

The eight critical lenses below provide a framework for introducing students to literary analysis. At the beginning of the semester, I explain the concept of literary analysis and introduce students to these eight critical lenses. These are a distillation (and in some cases an amalgamation) of major literary theories/schools of criticism. In addition to the questions and strategies listed here, I ask students to come up with their own questions and strategies for examining texts through each of these lenses. Then I add students' ideas to these lists and we agree, as a group, to use these tools moving forward. This co-creation of critical lens questions centers student's ideas/methods of inquiry, promotes agency, and engenders a shared understanding of our literary analysis work.

Students are asked to apply the critical lenses to various individual and combinations of texts throughout the semester. This is done in the context of class discussions (or online discussion forums), short and long writing assignments, and multimodal projects. At various points throughout the semester, I assign readings from *The Theory Toolbox* to give students the opportunity to flesh out their understandings of these literary theories and approaches to analysis and criticism. I have included suggested chapters from *The Theory Toolbox* under each critical lens.

[Nealon, Jeffrey T. \*The Theory Toolbox: Critical Concepts for the Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences\*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2012.](#)

**Critical Lenses** (adapted from [VonSteuben Metropolitan Science Center](#))

**Reader Response Lens:** Reading a text for personal meaning and relevance.

- In what ways is the text familiar to your lived experience?
- Consider the events in the story, the types of characters, or the setting. Can you relate to any of these elements on a personal level?
- In what ways is the text different from your lived experience?
- How did the text affect you?
- How are the worldviews presented in the text similar to or different from your own?
- *The Theory Toolbox* chapters 2, 3, 4, 13

**Socio-Economic Lens:** Reading a text for its socio-economic issues.

- Explore the way different demographics are represented in texts.
- What worldview does the text represent? How is this related to or determined by social or economic issues?
- What does the text say about class and power structures?
- Analyze the social conditions reflected in the text and/or the social effects of the text.
- *The Theory Toolbox* chapters 10, 13

**Historical Lens:** Reading a text for its contextual significance. This could include information about the author, his or her historical moment, or the systems of meaning available at the time of writing.

- Research the author's life and relate the information to the text. Why did the author write it? What is the author's worldview? What are the author's biases?
- Research the author's time (political history, intellectual history, economic history, etc.) and relate this information to the work.
- Upon reading the text/researching the context, how has your view on the given historical event changed?
- *The Theory Toolbox* chapters 7, 9

**Gender Lens:** Reading a text for its gender related issues or attitudes towards gender.

- Consider the gender of the author and the characters. What role does gender play in the text?
- Observe how gender stereotypes might be reinforced or undermined. Try to see how the text reflects or distorts the places or roles of people of different genders in society.
- Does the author rely on the gender binary or non-binary constructions?
- Imagine reading the text from the point of view of someone from another gender identity. What might stand out to you?
- *The Theory Toolbox* chapters 10, 13

**Race Lens:** Reading a text for issues of race.

- Analyze how the text discusses race. What are the racial identities of the characters? How do they interact with each other?
- What images of "others" are presented in the text? How are these "others" portrayed?
- Are there any stereotypes?
- How does race inform power in the text?
- Analyze the text for how it deals with racism and conflict, particularly between dominant and marginalized groups.
- *The Theory Toolbox* chapters 9, 10, 13

**Ethnicity Lens:** Reading a text for issues of heritage, ethnicity, and culture.

- Analyze how the text discusses or portrays culture, heritage, and ethnicity.
- What images of "others" are presented in the text? How are these "others" portrayed?
- Are there any stereotypes?
- How does culture, heritage, and ethnicity inform identity in the text?
- Analyze the text for how it deals with conflict related to issues of heritage, ethnicity, and culture.
- *The Theory Toolbox* chapters 5, 10, 13

**Psychological Lens:** Reading a text for insights on human psychology and the patterns of behavior it produces.

- Why do certain characters act the way they do?
- Think of the range of human emotions. How do they come to play in the text? (happiness, anger, depression, indifference, confusion, etc.)
- What did you think of the choices that the characters made?
- Think about the broader social issues the text attempts to address and how these might impact the psychological states and behaviors of the characters.
- *The Theory Toolbox* chapters 4, 5, 6

**New Criticism Lens:** Reading a text for its formal qualities. The focus should be on the text itself.

- What types of symbolism are in the text?
- What themes recur throughout the text?
- Were the plot and subplots believable?
- Does the story fit an archetype? (i.e. romance, tragedy, comedy, satire, irony). How do those “types” manifest themselves?
- *The Theory Toolbox* chapters 2, 3, 9