**Lenses for Reading Literature**

Anytime we read a work of literature, we are able to read that work through a variety of lenses

and focus on different details or meanings in that work depending on the “lens” we use. For

example, sometimes we read through a lens that allows us to ignore the hidden meanings of a

text and focus on the enjoyment that reading this text gives us. Other times, we might read

through a historical lens, thinking about when a text was written and what it might have been

saying about the historical period and society of the author. We might also read through a

gender lens, focusing on the differences between male and female characters and seeing if

issues of gender equality/inequality appear as we read.

Below is a list of lenses you might choose from when reading a text:

**1.Ethnicity/Race/Culture**: This lens allows us to look at issues/conflicts/questions that

arise in a text that relate to the ethnicities, races, and cultures of the characters in the

text. It is particularly important to consider these issues when characters in the text

come from different ethnic/racial/cultural backgrounds and the text reveals how the

characters’ diverse backgrounds might cause confusion, conflict, or meaningful

interactions. It is also important when stereotypes or prejudice results because of these

differences. An example of this is Rita Dove’s “Parsley,” where the Dominican General

Trujillo decided to kill many Haitian workers because they did not speak Spanish

“properly.” Another example could be “Two Kinds,” where the Chinese mother and her

Chinese‐American daughter come into conflict.

When these differences in culture represent one group who is oppressed and another

group that is in power (or colonizes/controls this oppressed group), this lens can be

called **Post‐Colonial Literary Criticism** (Schilb 1603). Also, for more information on this,

visit <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/722/10/>.

**2. Gender**: This lens examines the conventional or traditional roles that men and women

may play in a text and also how men and women might reject or protest or try to change

these roles. An example of reading a text through a gender lens may be looking at the

relationship between the narrator of “The Yellow Wallpaper” and her husband, John, or

to think about how the gender of the aunt in “No Name Woman” contributed to her

punishment and suicide and asking whether a man who committed the same act would

be treated differently.

In literary criticism, this lens is often called **Feminist Criticism*.*** Feminist critics “hope to

uncover and challenge essentialist attitudes that hold it is normal for women to be kept

in domestic, secondary, and subservient roles, and they affirm the value of a woman’s

experiences and perspectives in understanding the world” (Schilb 1601). For more

information on this, visit http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/722/11/.

This lens can also be used to talk about sexuality and sexual orientation. This approach is

called **Gender Studies and Queer Theory** and raises questions about how characters of

different genders or sexualities are portrayed/described in a text. For more information,

please see <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/722/12/>.

**3. History**: This lens considers how the time period and place is described in a text and

how a writer’s life may affect the way she writes about a particular time and place.

Looking at a text through this lens means asking what a particular text says about a

particular time and place. It also means thinking carefully about why a particular writer

might depict a moment in history in a particular way and how a reader living in a

particular time period or place might understand a text in a particular way. An example

of this is Kurt Vonnegut’s “Harrison Bergeron.” This was written in 1961, a time in which

many people in America were thinking about issues surrounding communism and

capitalism. If we read this text through a historical lens, we might think about what

Vonnegut might be trying to say about communism, capitalism, and equality. We might

also think about what would be different in the story if Vonnegut had written this is

2010 vs. 1961. To what extent are Vonnegut’s social concerns relevant today?

This approach is often called **New Historicism** (1601). Also, see the following website for

more information: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/722/09/>.

**4. Psychology**: This lens focuses on the internal struggles/issues/concerns of a character in

a text. If we read a text through this lens, we may focus on the feelings of guilt, fear, or

inner conflicts of a particular character, trying to understand what the character’s

emotional state may be and what the character’s unconscious desires may be. An

example of this is Sylvia Plath’s “Daddy.” Plath describes her speaker as suffering from

something that Sigmund Freud calls the Electra complex, in which a daughter idolizes

her father as a sort of God. Critics have also pointed out that the speaker has very

ambiguous feelings about her father as she mourns his death, desires to be close to him,

and also hates and fears him.

This approach is similar to **Psychoanalytic Criticism** and the theories of Sigmund Freud

(1601). For more information, also see

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/722/04/>.

**5. Social Class:** This lens often overlaps with lenses that examine culture, race, ethnicity,

and history. Overall, this lens looks at the differences between social classes of

characters. It looks at a text to see if there are any important differences in the

economic or social status among characters. For example, when using this lens, you

might ask yourself, is there one character who has a lot more money that the other

characters? A lot less money than other characters? What are the different types of jobs

that different characters hold? An example of using this lens might be reading through

Jamaica Kinkaid’s “Girl” and thinking about the types of work that the characters in this

text do. Are these jobs associated with prestigious social status or wealth? Why or why

not? Why is this important in understanding the text?

This approach is often called **Marxist Criticism** because it addresses some of the class

and economic issues that Karl Marx wrote about (1601). For more information, please

see http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/722/05/.