Note to teachers: Several of the activities include the original terms Feminist and Marxist, rather than or in addition to gender and social power/class. Teachers should feel free to adapt the materials for their classrooms.

Activity 1: “Little Miss Muffet,” by Russell Baker
Activity 2: Group Exercise for John Updike’s “Separating”
Activity 3: A Matter of Perspective
Activity 4: Literary Perspectives Toolkit
Activity 5: Literary Theories: A Sampling of Critical Lenses
Activity 6: Literary Theory Cards
Activity 7: TheoryWars: Looking at Star Wars Through Critical Lenses
Activity 8: Literary Theory: Prisms of Possibilities
Activity 9: Upon Seeing an Orange
Activity 10: Looking Through Lenses: Our First Look
Activity 11: Reader-Response Chart
Activity 12: Reader Response and Native Son
Activity 13: Key Ideas of Marx
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One of the fascinating aspects of American English is its diversity, and one of the causes of this diversity is the specialized vocabularies of different occupations in America. Russell Baker’s report of a conference dealing with Little Miss Muffet, taken from Poor Russell’s Almanac, illustrates several varieties of occupational jargon.

Little Miss Muffet, as everyone knows, sat on a tuffet eating her curds and whey when along came a spider who sat down beside her and frightened Miss Muffet away. While everyone knows this, the significance of the event had never been analyzed until a conference of thinkers recently brought their special insights to bear upon it. Following are excerpts from the transcript of their discussion:

**Sociologist:** We are clearly dealing here with a prototypical illustration of a highly tensile social structure’s tendency to dis- or perhaps even de-structure itself under the pressures created when optimum minimums do not obtain among the disadvantaged. Miss Muffet is nutritionally underprivileged, as evidenced by the subliminal diet of curds and whey upon which she is forced to subsist, while the spider’s cultural disadvantage is evidenced by such phenomena as legs exceeding standard norms, odd mating habits, and so forth.

In this instance, spider expectations lead the culturally disadvantaged to assert demands to share the tuffet with the nutritionally underprivileged. Due to a communications failure, Miss Muffet assumes without evidence that the spider will not be satisfied to share her tuffet, but will also insist on eating her curds and perhaps even her whey. Thus, the failure to pre-establish selectively optimum norm structures diverts potentially optimal minimums from the expectation levels assumed to...

**Militarist:** Second-strike capability, sir! That’s what was lacking. If Miss Muffet had developed a second-strike capability instead of squandering her resources on curds and whey, no spider on earth would have dared launch a first strike capable of carrying him right to the heart of her tuffet. I am confident that Miss Muffet had...
adequate notice from experts that she could not afford both curds and whey and, at the same time, support an early-spider-warning system. Yet curds alone were not good enough for Miss Muffet. She had to have whey, too. Tuffet security must be the first responsibility of every diner . . .

**Book Reviewer:** Written on several levels, this searing and sensitive exploration of the arachnid heart illuminates the agony and splendor of Jewish family life with a candor that is at once breathtaking in its simplicity and soul-shattering in its implied ambiguity. Some will doubtless be shocked to see such subjects as tuffets and whey discussed without flinching, but hereafter writers too timid to call a curd a curd will no longer . . .

**Editorial Writer:** Why has the government not seen fit to tell the public all it knows about the so-called curds-and-whey affair? It is not enough to suggest that this was merely a random incident involving a lonely spider and a young diner. In today’s world, poised as it is on the knife edge of . . .

**Psychiatrist:** Little Miss Muffet is, of course, neither little or a miss. These are obviously the self she has created in her own fantasies to escape the reality that she is a gross divorcee whose superego makes it impossible for her to sustain a normal relationship with any man, symbolized by the spider, who, of course, has no existence outside her fantasies. Little Miss Muffet may, in fact, be a man with deeply repressed Oedipal impulses, who sees in the spider the father he would like to kill, and very well may some day, unless he admits that what he believes to be a tuffet is, in fact, probably the dining room chandelier, and that what he thinks he is eating is, in fact, probably . . .

**Student Demonstrator:** Little Miss Muffet, tuffets, curds, whey and spiders are what’s wrong with education today. They’re all irrelevant. Tuffets are irrelevant. Curds are irrelevant. Whey is irrelevant. Meaningful experience! How can you have relevance without meaningful experience? And how can there ever be meaningful experience without understanding? With understanding and meaningfulness and relevance, there can be love and good and deep seriousness and education today will be freed of slavery and Little Miss Muffet, and life will become meaningful and . . .

**Child:** This is about a little girl who gets scared by a spider. (The child was sent home when the conference broke for lunch. It was agreed that he was too immature to subtract anything from the sum of human understanding.)
Activity 2

Group Exercise for John Updike’s “Separating”

Read John Updike’s “Separating” on your own. Then, get into groups of three or four and work together on the following questions.

1. List all the characters that appear in the story.

2. From whose point of view is the story told?

3. Summarize the story from that character’s point of view. That is, according to the character you named in Question 2, what happens in this story?

4. Now, pick another character from those you listed in Question 1. Summarize the story from the viewpoint of that character.

5. Reread the last two paragraphs of the story. Speculate together on what will happen next. Is there any reason to believe that Richard and Joan might not separate?

6. Extend the story. Write at least one page from the point of view of the character you used in Question 4.
ACTIVITY 3

A Matter of Perspective

Let’s explore the notion of perspective. Much contemporary fiction violates traditional narrative expectations by telling the story from the perspective of a variety of characters, rather than from the perspective of a single protagonist.

1. Tell the story of “The Three Little Pigs.”

2. Now, look at the children’s book *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs, As Told by A. Wolf*. What differences does that switch in perspective make?

3. Think of a family story, preferably one that is retold often, a part of your family mythology. In a paragraph or so, tell that story from your own perspective. Write your version below.

4. Now, think of another family member, and retell the story from his/her perspective. Write that version below.
   
   Family Member: _______________________

5. In groups of no more than four, share those stories and discuss the difference perspective makes. How can we know what is the “true” version of the story?
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.
**The Archetypal Perspective:** In literary criticism, the word *archetype* signifies a recognizable pattern or a model. It can be used to describe story designs, character types, or images that can be found in a wide variety of works of literature. It can also be applied to myths, dreams, and social rituals. The archetypal similarities among texts and behaviors are thought to reflect a set of universal, even primitive ways of seeing the world. When we find them in literary works they evoke strong responses from readers. Archetypal themes include the heroic journey and the search for a father figure. Archetypal images include the opposition of Paradise and Hades, the river as a sign of life and movement, and mountains or other high places as sources of enlightenment. Characters can be archetypal as well, like the rebel-hero, the scapegoat, the villain, and goddess.

**The Formalist Perspective:** The word *formal* has two related meanings, both of which apply within this perspective. The first relates to its root word *form*, a shape of structure that we can recognize and use to make associations. The second relates to a set of conventions or accepted practices. Formal poetry, for example, has meter, rhyme, stanza, and other predictable features that it shares with poems of the same type. The formalist perspective, then, pays particular attention to these issues of form and convention. Instead of looking at the world in which a poem exists, for example, the formalist perspective says that a poem should be treated as an independent and self-sufficient object. The methods used in this perspective are those of close reading, a detailed and subtle analysis of the formal components that make up the literary work, such as the meanings and interactions of words, figures of speech, and symbols.

**The Character Perspective:** Some literary critics call this the *psychological* perspective because its purpose is to examine the internal motivations of literary characters. When we hear actors say that they are searching for their character’s motivation, they are using something like this perspective. As a form of criticism, this perspective deals with works of literature as expressions of the personality, state of mind, feelings, and desires of the author or of a character within the literary work. As readers, we investigate the psychology of a character or an author to figure out the meaning of a text (although sometimes an examination of the author’s psychology is considered biographical criticism, depending upon your point of view).

**The Biographical Perspective:** Because authors typically write about things they care deeply about and know well, the events and circumstances of their lives are often reflected in the literary works they create. For this reason, some readers use biographical information about an author to gain insight into that author’s works. This lens, called biographical criticism, can be both helpful and dangerous. It can provide insight into themes, historical references, social oppositions or movements, and the
creation of fictional characters. At the same time, it is not safe to assume that biographical details from the author’s life can be transferred to a story or character that the author has created. For example, Ernest Hemingway and John Dos Passos were both ambulance drivers during World War I and both wrote novels about the war. Their experiences gave them first-hand knowledge and created strong personal feelings about the war, but their stories are still works of fiction. Some biographical details, in fact, may be completely irrelevant to the interpretation of that writer’s work.

**The Historical Perspective:** When applying this perspective, you view a literary text within its historical context. Specific historical information will be of key interest: about the time during which an author wrote, about the time in which the text is set, about the ways in which people of the period saw and thought about the world in which they lived. History, in this case, refers to the social, political, economic, cultural, and/or intellectual climate of the time. For example, the literary works of William Faulkner frequently reflect the history of the American South, the Civil War and its aftermath, and the birth and death of a nation known as The Confederate States of America.

**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.

**The Social-Power Perspective:** Some critics believe that human history and institutions, even our ways of thinking, are determined by the ways in which our societies are organized. Two primary factors shape our schemes of organization: economic power and social class membership. First, the class to which we belong determines our degree of economic, political, and social advantage, and thus social classes invariably find themselves in conflict with each other. Second, our membership in a social class has a profound impact on our beliefs, values, perceptions, and our ways
of thinking and feeling. For these reasons, the social-power perspective helps us understand how people from different social classes understand the same circumstances in very different ways. When we see members of different social classes thrown together in the same story, we are likely to think in terms of power and advantage as we attempt to explain what happens and why.

**The Gender Perspective:** Because gender is a way of viewing the world, people of different genders see things differently. For example, a feminist critic might see cultural and economic disparities as the products of a “patriarchal” society, shaped and dominated by men, who tend to decide things by various means of competition. In addition, societies often tend to see the male perspective as the default, that is, the one we choose automatically. As a result, women are identified as the “other,” the deviation or the contrasting type. When we use the gender lens, we examine patterns of thought, behavior, value, and power in interactions between the sexes.

**Deconstruction:** Deconstruction is, at first, a difficult critical method to understand because it asks us to set aside ways of thinking that are quite natural and comfortable. For example, we frequently see the world as a set of opposing categories: male/female, rational/irrational, powerful/powerless. It also looks at the ways in which we assign value to one thing over another, such as life over death, presence over absence, and writing over speech. At its heart, deconstruction is a mode of analysis that asks us to question the very assumptions that we bring to that analysis. Gender, for example, is a construct, a set of beliefs and assumptions that we have built, or constructed, over time and experience. But if we deconstruct gender, looking at it while holding aside our internalized beliefs and expectations, new understandings become possible. To practice this perspective, then, we must constantly ask ourselves why we believe what we do about the make-up of our world and the ways in which we have come to understand the world. Then, we must try to explain that world in the absence of our old beliefs.
ACTIVITY 5

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.

**Archetypal Criticism.** In criticism archetype signifies narrative designs, character types, or images which are said to be identifiable in a wide variety of works of literature, as well as in myths, dreams, and even ritualized modes of social behavior. The archetypal similarities within these diverse phenomena are held to reflect a set of universal, primitive, and elemental patterns, whose effective embodiment in a literary work evokes a profound response from the reader. The death-rebirth theme is often said to be the archetype of archetypes. Other archetypal themes are the journey underground, the heavenly ascent, the search for the father, the Paradise-Hades image, the Promethean rebel-hero, the scapegoat, the earth goddess, and the fatal woman.

**Gender/Feminist 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/Marxist 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.

New Criticism is directed against the prevailing concern of critics with the lives and psychology of authors, with social background, and with literary history. There are several points of view and procedures that are held in common by most New Critics.
1. A poem should be treated as primarily poetry and should be regarded as an independent and self-sufficient object.

2. The distinctive procedure of the New Critic is explication, or close reading: The detailed and subtle analysis of the complex interrelations and ambiguities of the components within a work.

3. The principles of New Criticism are basically verbal. That is, literature is conceived to be a special kind of language whose attributes are defined by systematic opposition to the language of science and of practical and logical discourse. The key concepts of this criticism deal with the meanings and interactions of words, figures of speech, and symbols.

4. The distinction between literary genres is not essential.

**Psychological and Psychoanalytic Criticism.** Psychological criticism deals with a work of literature primarily as an expression, in fictional form, of the personality, state of mind, feelings, and desires of its author. The assumption of psychoanalytic critics is that a work of literature is correlated with its author’s mental traits:

1. Reference to the author’s personality is used to explain and interpret a literary work.
2. Reference to literary works is made in order to establish, biographically, the personality of the author.
3. The mode of reading a literary work itself is a way of experiencing the distinctive subjectivity or consciousness of its author.

This theory requires that we investigate the psychology of a character or an author to figure out the meaning of a text (although to apply an author’s psychology to a text can also be considered biographical criticism, depending upon your point of view). For example, alcohol allows the latent thoughts and desires of the narrator of “The Black Cat” to surface in such a way that he ends up shirking the self-control imposed by social mores and standards and becomes the man his psyche has repressed his whole life.

**Reader-Response Criticism.** This type of criticism focuses on the activity of reading a work of literature. Reader-response critics turn from the traditional conception of a work as an achieved structure of meanings to the responses of readers as their eyes follow a text. By this shift of perspective a literary work is converted into an activity that goes on in a reader’s mind, and what had been features of the work itself—including narrator, plot, characters, style, and structure—is less important than the connection between a reader’s experience and the text. It is through this interaction that meaning is made.
Students seem most comfortable with this school of criticism. Proponents believe that literature has no objective meaning or existence. People bring their own thoughts, moods, and experiences to whatever text they are reading and get out of it whatever they happen to, based upon their own expectations and ideas. For example, when I read “Sonny’s Blues” I am reminded of my younger sister who loves music. The story really gets to me because sometimes I worry about her and my relationship with her. I want to support her in a way that Sonny’s brother does not support Sonny.

**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:

**Deconstructionist Criticism.** Deconstruction is, by far, the most difficult critical theory for people to understand. It was developed by some very unconventional thinkers who declare that literature means nothing because language means nothing. In other words, we cannot say that we know what the “meaning” of a story is because there is no way of knowing. For example, in some stories (like “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been”) that do not have tidy endings, you cannot assume you know what happened.

**Historical Criticism.** Using this theory requires that you apply to a text specific historical information about the time during which an author wrote. History, in this case, refers to the social, political, economic, cultural, and/or intellectual climate of the time. For example, William Faulkner wrote many of his novels and stories during and after World War II, which helps to explain the feelings of darkness, defeat, and struggle that pervade much of his work.
ACTIVITY 6

Literary Theory Cards

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.
**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.

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**Archetypal Lens**

**Essential Question:** How does this text show similarities to ancient story designs, character categories, and imagery?

**Central Concerns:** myth, image, dreams, rituals, pattern, model

**Critical Assumptions:**

1. Imaginative work is indebted to ancient systems of meaning, including ritual, mythology, and inherited symbolism (the “collective unconscious”).
2. There are no new stories.
3. Conflicts, characters, and symbols in fiction and poetry come from the same place as dreams, and can be interpreted the same way dreams are.

**What to do:**

1. Determine how the text mirrors certain inherited story structures, such as the heroic journey, creation myths, fairy tales, legends, and so forth.
2. Determine how the characters in the text can be said to reflect inherited character types such as the hero, the crone, the wicked stepmother, and so forth.
3. Show patterns in the text that resemble dream logic or seem to be without explicit context.
Biographical Lens

**Essential Question:** How does this text reflect the experiences, beliefs, and intentions of its maker(s)?

**Central Concerns:** context, systems of meaning, commentary, society, belief, self-expression

**Critical Assumptions:**
1. Meaning is contextual.
2. Writing is a product of social, political, and historical forces.
3. Writing reflects the systems of meaning available to the author.
4. Interpretation of writing demands interpretation of its historical or biographical context.

**What to do:**
1. Research the author’s life, and relate that information to the text.
2. Research the author’s time—its historical, geographical, political, and intellectual moment—and relate that data to the text.
3. Research the systems of meaning available to the author, and relate those systems to the text.

New Criticism/Formalism Lens

**Essential Question:** What does analysis of the text’s form reveal about the meaning of its content?

**Central Concerns:** form, unity, ambiguity, resolution, pattern, literacy language

**Critical Assumptions:**
1. A text will teach you how to read it; the work itself is the only locus of critical interest.
2. The author’s intentions are unavailable and irrelevant.
3. A text is valuable if it contains ambiguities, ironies, and complexities that can be resolved through careful analysis of its form.
4. A complex work will reveal a unifying theme.

**What to do:**
1. Determine oppositions, ambiguities, ironies, and complexities in the text.
2. Read closely; assume there are no “mistakes” in a text, or that any aspect of text is “unintentional.” Study the interrelationship of literary elements.
3. Explicate the text by showing how it resolves its ambiguities.
Gender/Feminist Lens

**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/ Marxist Lens

**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?
Psychological Lens

**Essential Question:** How can we apply psychology and psychoanalytical criticism to gain insights into the behavior and motivations of authors and characters?

**Central Concerns:** expression, personality, state of mind, designs of author

**Critical Assumptions:**
1. An author reveals repressed wishes or fears in a literary text.
2. Creative writing, like dreaming, can unlock the subconscious.
3. There are some patterns such as anxiety, repression, fear of death that can be applied both to individual characters and authors as well as generally to human beings.

**What to do:**
1. Look for an underlying psychological subtext in the work.
2. Discover key biographical moments and relate them to the text.
3. Try to explain the behavior of the characters in psychological terms, such as projection, repression, fear (of abandonment, sexuality, etc.).

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.
### 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.

### Deconstruction Lens

**Essential Question:** How does analysis of this text reveal privileged oppositions of meaning and arbitrary nature of language?

**Central Concerns:** privilege, hierarchies, indeterminacy, sign, signifier

**Critical Assumptions:**
1. Meaning is not determinate: it is made by binary oppositions (yes/no, positive, negative, etc.), but one item in an opposition is unavoidably favored or privileged over the other.
2. The hierarchy is arbitrary and can be exposed or reversed.
3. Texts contain unavoidable gaps, spaces, absences, contradictions and irresolvable ambiguities that defeat complete interpretation.

**What to do:**
1. Identify oppositions in the text.
2. Determine which member in a given opposition appears favored, and demonstrate contradiction of that favoring.
3. Expose a text’s inability to resolve its ambiguities.
ACTIVITY 7

Theory Wars:
Looking at *Star Wars* Through Critical Lenses

In your groups, discuss the following questions. You will be asked to share the fruits of your discussion with the whole class in your symposium.

1. Try to recall the first time you saw this film. In what ways was this viewing different from your first viewing. What were some things you noticed that you didn’t notice before? What seemed to be important this time that didn’t come through in a previous viewing?

2. Think back to our discussions of archetypes from last year. Describe how characters, plot, conflict or theme in *Star Wars* could be viewed in archetypal terms. For example, is this a classic story of good versus evil, is Princess Leah the typical heroine?

3. Read through the handout on literary theory. Select the two theories that you think might be most helpful in illuminating the film. Write down the theories below.
   1.
   2.

4. Now come up with some statements about the film for each of the theories you named in question 3. For example, if you select feminist criticism you might discuss the lack of female characters and evaluate the role of Princess Leah from a feminist perspective. If you choose reader-response theory you might describe how the film reminded each of you of a personal experience in your struggle with good and evil. (Use loose-leaf paper—journal potential.)

5. After you discuss these interpretations, decide how to present them to the whole class. Your presentation should be no more than about ten minutes of your symposium.
Literary Theory: Prisms of Possibilities

Please read the Sylvia Plath poem and discuss it in your group using the assigned lens. We will consider each lens when we reconvene as a large group.

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<th>Feminist/ Gender</th>
<th>Marxist/ Social Class</th>
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<td>What aspects of the poem lend themselves to this particular lens?</td>
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<td>Cite specific textual passage(s) that support this reading.</td>
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<td>If you look through this lens, what themes or patterns are brought into sharper relief?</td>
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<td>If you look through this lens, what questions emerge?</td>
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<td>Do you believe in this reading? Why or why not?</td>
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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
ACTIVITY 10

Looking Through Lenses: Our First Look

Group Members:

Summer Reading Text:

1. In three or four sentences please summarize the plot of the book.

2. What were some of the most important things you noticed about the text before we read our discussion of lenses?

3. Which two lenses do you think might be most useful to apply to this text?

4. Which lenses do you think might not be particularly useful? Why?

5. Now try applying the two lenses that you selected in #3.
Lens 1

When we viewed this book through the lenses, we looked at:

The lenses help us see the following things that we didn’t notice before:

Therefore we see that this might be a book about:

Lens 2

When we viewed this book through the lenses, we looked at:

The lenses help us see the following things that we didn’t notice before:

Therefore we see that this might be a book about:

* * * Journal Entry * * * Journal Entry * * * Journal Entry * * *

Reflecting on the above, write an entry in your journal summarizing what you discovered from this activity. What worked, what went “clunk”?

What were the most and least useful elements of this first application of critical lenses?
ACTIVITY 11

Reader-Response Chart

Context
(What factors surrounding my reading of the text are influencing my response?)

Reader ( ) ——— Meaning ——— Text ( )

YOUR NAME

(What personal qualities or events relevant to this particular book might influence my response?)

(What textual features might influence my response?)

Context
ACTIVITY 12

Reader Response and *Native Son*

Context
(What factors surrounding my reading of the text are influencing my response?)

Reader (YOUR NAME) ➔ Meaning ➙ Text (*Native Son*)

(What personal qualities or events relevant to this particular book might influence my response?)

(What textual features might influence my response?)

Context

ACTIVITY 13

Key Ideas of Marx

Stages of History

Marx believed that history moved in stages: from feudalism to capitalism, socialism, and ultimately communism.

Materialism

Each stage was mainly shaped by the economic system. The key to understanding the systems was to focus on the “mode of production.” (For example, most production under feudalism was agricultural, while most production under capitalism was industrial.) It also was necessary to focus on who owned the “means of production.” (Under capitalism a small class—the bourgeoisie—owned the factories. Under socialism, the factories would be owned by the workers.)

Class Struggle

“The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.” Each system, up to and including capitalism, was characterized by the exploitation of one class by another.

The Dialectic

Marx believed that great historical changes followed a three-step pattern called thesis-antithesis-synthesis. Any idea or condition (thesis) brought into being its opposite (antithesis). For example, the existence of the ruling bourgeoisie under capitalism made necessary the existence of its opposite, the proletariat. The two opposites would conflict until they produced a new, higher stage (synthesis).
Internal Contradictions

Each class system therefore contained the seeds of its own destruction, which Marx sometimes called “internal contradictions.” Capitalism, he believed, was plagued by such contradictions, which would get worse and worse until they destroyed it.

Capitalism

Marx saw capitalism as the cruelest, most efficient system yet evolved for the exploitation of the working majority by a small class of owners. It was the nature of capitalism, Marx believed, for wealth and ownership to be concentrated into an ever-shrinking class of megarich. This was one of many internal contradictions of capitalism that would inevitably destroy it.

Working-Class Misery

It was the nature of capitalist production methods to become more and more technologically efficient, requiring fewer and fewer workers to produce more and more goods. Therefore, capitalism would be plagued by bouts of high unemployment. As machines made a worker’s skill less important, wages would be pushed ever downward. As each worker became simply an appendage of a machine, his job would be less satisfying and he would become more alienated.

Class Consciousness

Such total exploitation of so many by so few could not last forever. The workers would inevitably develop “class consciousness,” or an awareness of their predicament. When that occurred, it would be fairly simple to take over the factories and the state.

End of History

Since class conflict was the engine that drove history, and since under communism there would be no class distinctions, history would come to its final resting place in a system free of exploitation.
ACTIVITY 14

Reading *Hamlet* Through the Marxist/Social Class Lens

**Act 1—Warm-up Discussion**

First things first. This stuff can be pretty cool but takes a bit of practice. It can be hard, but I’ve heard you’re pretty smart readers. So here goes. Have you considered Marxist/social class literary theory in your reading before? With what texts? How did that consideration affect your reading of the text as a whole?

The article you read, “Marxist Criticism” by Stephen Bonnycastle, states that in order to understand *Hamlet* from a Marxist perspective, you need to know something about Shakespeare’s times and the class struggle present then. What *do* you know about that?

An *ideology* is a view of the world, a prevailing set of beliefs. What are some examples of ideologies you have come across?

What is the prevailing ideology that is represented in *Hamlet*? Are there other differing views of the world that fight with one another within the text? Explain.
**Act 2—In Trios and Then as a Class**

“Marxist/social class criticism pays a lot of attention to the social structures that allocate power to different groups in society.” List some of the social groups that are represented in *Hamlet*.

We’ve all heard the term *social ladder*. Try plotting some of the *Hamlet* characters on the social ladder graph below.
Name some of the primary power struggles that the play portrays. Who has the power and who doesn’t?

**Conflict Between:**

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Put a * next to the power struggles that could be considered class conflicts.

**Act 3—On Your Own**

The following questions should be done on your own. You don’t have to share your responses to the first one, but we may discuss your responses to the second and third questions in class tomorrow.

Marxist literary theory asserts the importance of paying attention to class conflicts, power struggles and how we place ourselves within the particular social structure in which we find ourselves. Draw a picture or diagram, if you can, of the existing power or class structure in which you live. You can do it like the social ladder we used above, or you can draw concentric circles, or you can map or web, anything is fine. Where are you, relative to where power and money is located?
To what degree do you think this location may have affected your reading of Hamlet? What characters in Hamlet do you feel most closely represent where you are socially.

Marxist literary theory encourages us to look at the big political questions that surround our more personal concerns. List below some of the big questions that emerge for you as a result of reading Hamlet through a Marxist lens.

Now think of one or two smaller, more personal and perhaps more important questions that emerge for you as you think about issues of class conflict, ideologies or beliefs, and struggle. List them below.
As we have seen, we can use literary lenses to read nonfiction as well as fiction. As with fiction, different lenses bring different aspects of the text into sharper relief. Let’s look at the essay “Blue Collar Brilliance” by Mike Rose through the reader-response lens and the class lens. You may find it helpful to read through your theory cards as you consider each lens.

**The Reader-Response Lens**

Mike Rose begins this piece by telling us about his mother who was a waitress. How does this personal example affect your response to this essay? To the writer?

What experiences have you had with the body-mind connection that Rose explores?

Do you buy Rose’s argument that we undervalue certain kinds of manual labor?

Are you proud of your parent(s)’ occupation? Explain.

How do you think your own identification with a particular social class affects your response to Rose’s argument?
The Class Lens

What is surprising or significant about the title of the essay?

In what ways does this essay trouble our assumptions about intelligence?

In what ways does this essay trouble our assumptions about social class? How are our assumptions about intelligence and social class connected?

Rose’s mother was a waitress and his uncle worked at General Motors. How do the examples of his family members bring social class into the essay?

Putting It All Together

Why does Rose use the personal examples of his mother, a waitress, and his uncle, a factory worker, to make his argument about the intelligence of blue-color workers?

How do the lenses of reader response and class interact to help construct your overall reading of the piece?

Do you find Rose’s discussion about intelligence to be persuasive? Explain.

*Note to teachers: this essay can be easily found online.
We can use literary lenses to read nonfiction as well as fiction. Let’s look at this frequently read essay “On Dumpster Diving” through three lenses. You may find it helpful to read through your theory cards as you consider each lens.

**Approach One: The Reader-Response Lens—A Personal Transaction with a Nonfiction Piece**

What is your initial response to the essay?

Did you find any sections of the essay disagreeable or repugnant?

Do you have any sympathy for the writer? Why or why not?

Have you ever known someone who is or has been homeless? How does that experience or lack of it affect your response to the essay?

**Approach Two: The Formalist Lens—A Close Reading of a Nonfiction Piece**

Who do you think the writer imagines his audience to be? Are you part of that intended audience?
Comment on the overall structure of the essay.

What effect does the use of the present tense have on the overall effect of the story?

Give several examples of the writer’s use of figurative language.

Find some examples of the use of the following rhetorical strategies in this essay:
  Comparison-contrast/cause/effect, definition, description, process

Analysis, classification

How would you describe the tone of the essay?

How does the style of the writing intersect in surprising ways with the content of the essay?
Approach Three: The Class Lens—
Reading Nonfiction Through a Political Lens

In what ways is this piece a commentary on the situation of the homeless in the United States?

What larger point about America’s class system is the writer trying to make in this essay?

What do the dumpster’s contents indicate about those who throw the food away?

How is the writer not a typical homeless person? How might that affect your response to his situation?

In what ways is government implicated in the plight of the homeless?

Is the writer’s situation of his own making or are there societal implications that could be considered?

Putting It All Together

Which lens seemed to be most useful in your reading of this essay? What does each contribute to your overall understanding of the essay? Based on the essay itself, which lenses do you think the writer considered as he wrote this essay?

*Note to teachers: this essay can be easily found online.
ACTIVITY 17

Looking at

The Great Gatsby

Through Critical Lenses

Literary theories were developed as a means for understanding the various ways in which 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 read a text with one in mind because you often end up with a whole new perspective on your reading. We are going to apply two lenses to The Great Gatsby, the Marxist/social class lens and the gender lens.

Definitions:

Social Class Criticism. Social class criticism grounds its theory and practice on the economic and cultural theory of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, especially on the following claims:

1. 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.
2. Historical changes in the fundamental mode of production effect essential changes both in the constitution and power relations among social classes, which carry on a conflict for economic, political, and social advantage.
3. Human consciousness in any era is constituted by an ideology—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 social class critic typically undertakes to “explain” the literature in any era by revealing the economic, class, and ideological determinants that inform the way an author writes, as well as to examine the relationship of the text to the social reality of the time and place in which it is set.

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?
Strategies for Applying the Social Class Lens:

1. Explore the ways in which different groups of people are represented in texts. Evaluate the level of social realism in the text—How is society portrayed?
2. Determine the ideological stance of the text—What worldview does the text represent?
3. Consider how the text itself is a commodity that reproduces certain social beliefs and practices. Analyze the social effect of the literary work.

Gender Criticism. This is somewhat like social class criticism, but instead of focusing on the relationships among social classes it focuses on the relationships between the genders. In using this theory, you would examine the patterns of thought, behavior, values, enfranchisement, and power in relations between the sexes. There are many different kinds of gendered literary theory. Some theorists examine the language and symbols that are used to see how language and use of symbols is gendered. Others remind us that men and women write differently and analyze how the gender of the author affects how literature is written. Many gender theory critics look at how the characters, especially the female characters, are portrayed and ask us to consider how the portrayal of female characters “reinforces or undermines” sexual stereotypes. Gender literary theory also suggests that the gender of the reader affects his or her response to a text. For example, gender critics may claim that certain male writers address their readers as if they were all men and exclude the female reader.

Much gender theory reminds us that the relationship between men and women in society is often unequal and reflects a particular patriarchal ideology. Those unequal relationships may appear in a variety of ways in the production of literature and within literary texts. Gender theory invites us to pay particular attention to the patterns of thought, behavior, values, and power in those relationships.

Gender critics remind us that literary values, conventions, and even the production of literature, have themselves been historically shaped by men. They invite us to consider writings by women, both new and forgotten, and also ask us to consider viewing familiar literature through a gendered perspective.

Strategies for applying the gender lens:

1. Consider the gender of the author, the characters. What role does gender or sexuality play in this work?
2. Specifically, observe how sexual stereotypes might be reinforced or undermined. Try to see how the work reflects or distorts the place of women (and men) in society.
3. Think about how gender affects and informs relationships between the characters.
4. Consider the comments the author seems to be making about society as a whole.
You can now use both of these lenses to interpret characters, passages, and themes in *The Great Gatsby*.

**The Question of Power:**

Name some of the primary power struggles that the novel portrays. Who has the power and who doesn’t?

### From the Perspective of Gender

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### From the Perspective of Class

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Passages:

Using the social class lens, what is the significance of this passage:

Every Friday five crates of oranges and lemons arrived from a fruiterer in New York—every Monday these same oranges and lemons left his back door in a pyramid of pulpless halves. There was a machine in the kitchen which could extract the juice of two hundred oranges in half an hour if a little button was pressed two hundred times by a butler’s thumb.

Using the gender lens, what is the significance of this passage:

Well, she was less than an hour old and Tom was God knows where. I woke up out of the ether with an utterly abandoned feeling, and asked the nurse right away if it was a boy or a girl. She told me it was a girl, and so I turned my head away and wept. “All right,” I said, “I’m glad it’s a girl, and I hope she’ll be a fool—that’s the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool.”

Themes:

Finish these sentences:

From the social class perspective, *The Great Gatsby* is a novel about . . .

From a gender perspective, *The Great Gatsby* is a novel about . . .

Further Questions:

Social class and gender literary theories encourage us to look at the big political questions that surround our more personal concerns. List below some of the big questions that emerge for you as a result of reading *The Great Gatsby* through social class and gender lenses.

Social Class Questions:

Gender Questions:

Now think of one or two smaller and more personal questions that emerge for you as you think about issues of class conflict, ideologies or beliefs, gender, and power. List them below.
1. What is the feminist/gender lens?

Feminist/gender literary criticism helps us look at literature in a different light. It applies the philosophies and perspectives of feminism to the literature we read. There are many different kinds of feminist/gender theory. Some theorists examine the language and symbols that are used and how that language and use of symbols is “gendered.” Others remind us that men and women write differently and analyze how the gender of the author affects how literature is written. Many feminist critics look at how the characters, especially the female characters, are portrayed and ask us to consider how the portrayal of female characters reinforces or undermines sexual stereotypes. Feminist literary theory also suggests that the gender of the reader often affects our response to a text. For example, feminist critics may claim that certain male writers address their readers as if they were all men and exclude the female reader.

Like feminism itself, feminist literary theory asks us to consider the relationships between men and women and their relative roles in society. Much feminist literary theory reminds us that the relationship between men and women in society is often unequal and reflects a particular patriarchal ideology. Those unequal relationships may appear in a variety of ways in the production of literature and within literary texts. Feminist theorists invite us to pay particular attention to the patterns of thought, behavior, values, and power in those relationships.

Feminist literary critics remind us that literary values, conventions, and even the production of literature have themselves been historically shaped by men. They invite us to consider writings by women, both new and forgotten, and also ask us to consider viewing familiar literature through a feminist perspective.

2. Consider Gertrude and Ophelia from *Hamlet*

For each character, write two descriptive statements—one from a “traditional” masculine perspective and the second from a feminist perspective.

*Gertrude:*

Traditional statement:

Feminist statement:
Ophelia:
Traditional statement:

Feminist statement:

3. How do we apply the feminist lens?

We apply it by closely examining the portrayal of the characters, both female and male, the language of the text, the attitude of the author, and the relationship between the characters. We also consider the comments the author seems to be making about society as a whole. Let’s try to interpret the following concrete poem in two ways, from a traditional perspective and from a feminist perspective:

She

—Pedro Xisto

4. Now, think about “The Yellow Wallpaper”

Using the feminist lens, write a brief analysis of the narrator, her situation, and perhaps Perkins’ intent in writing the piece. Consider Perkins’ audience as well. Finally, what meaning(s) did you derive from the text as you applied the feminist lens? (Note: this is very similar to the kind of analysis you may be asked to do in a college English class.)
1. What is the feminist lens?

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We apply it by closely examining the portrayal of the characters, both female and male, the language of the text, the attitude of the author, and the relationship between the characters. We also consider the comments the author seems to be making about society as a whole.
3. Is Virginia Woolf a feminist?

In groups of two or three, state whether the feminist literary lens would meet with Virginia Woolf’s approval. Does she agree that our readings are “gendered”? Does she believe that women characters and writers are marginalized? Be prepared to defend your statement with at least two quotations from *A Room of One’s Own*.

*Our position is:*

Quotation 1:

Quotation 2:
4. Application: Looking through the feminist lens

Select two female characters from novels with which you are very familiar. They could be from our summer reading, from works we have read together, or from texts you have read in previous English classes. For example, you might choose Daisy from *The Great Gatsby*, Hester Prynne from *The Scarlet Letter*, Sonya from *Crime and Punishment*, or other female characters from the texts we’ve read.

For each character, write two descriptive statements—one from a traditional masculine perspective and the second from a feminist perspective.

**Character 1:**

Traditional statement:

Feminist statement:

**Character 2:**

Traditional statement:

Feminist statement:
ACTIVITY 20

Death of a Salesman and the Social Construction of Gender

1. Consider the following words:

   fashion, football, breadwinner, pilot, strength, flower, ambitious, perseverance, compassionate, bossy, helpless, thoughtful, soft, brassy, dangerous, perpetrator, victim, attractive, opinionated, hostile, emotional

Using your first instinct and without over-thinking, write each in the column that seems most appropriate:

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<th>Both</th>
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2. Our ability to assign gender to words or constructs has to do with what some people call the social construction of gender. Using the feminist lens is one way to examine gender construction, but the notion of the social construction of gender broadens the lens to more fully consider how both men and women are affected by this social construction.

Read through the following explanations of the social construction of gender:

The Construction of Gender

This theory acknowledges that men and women are actively involved in constructing their own gendered identities. We adopt different masculinity and femininity practices depending on our situations and beliefs. Our understandings of gender are
dynamic, changing over time with maturity, experience, and reflection. Thus, we are active in constructing our own gender identities. The options available to us are not unlimited, however. We are influenced by the collective practices of institutions such as school, church, media, and family, which construct and reinforce particular forms of masculinity and femininity.

These widely accepted, dominant notions of gender often construct masculinity and femininity as opposites, ignoring a vast array of shared human characteristics, and traditionally valuing masculinity as more powerful. Such ideas may be accepted, challenged, modified, or rejected as individuals develop and shape their gender identities:

In their lives in family and community, and before they come to school, children learn socially approved ways of interacting as female or male. As a consequence, many girls and boys develop narrow and limited concepts of masculinity and femininity, concepts which impoverish their existence.


The construction of different ways of being feminine or masculine is a dynamic process in which we all play a part. Students need the critical skills to understand and assess narrow messages about the way they can live their lives.


The Social Construction of Gender

Underlying the different assumptions of the treatment of women and men is a whole series of complex ideologies that seek to explain (and create) the differences between men and women, observed as well as constructed. Sex differences, or the biological differences between males and females, are often cited as the basis for unequal treatment. Although we understand gender differences between men and women to represent socially constructed norms regarding the division of labor, the distribution of power, and differing responsibilities and rights between men and women, the basis for differentiation continues to be traced back to biological difference. However, it is obvious that the biological differences between men and women are minimal and insignificant when compared with the similarities. Biological difference becomes magnified or exaggerated to represent an ideology of sex difference, which we refer to as the ideology of gender. It is used to justify unequal treatment of women and men. The power of the ideology of gender lies in the way it encompasses fundamental cultural and social values relating to the relations between men and women, as well as the force of history underlying its evolution.

The ideology of gender determines:
• What is expected of us
• What is allowed of us
• What is valued in us

The ideology of gender also determines the nature and extent of:

• Disadvantage
• Disparity
• Discrimination

The manifestation of gender difference can be found in the construction of:

• Roles: What women and men do
• Relations: How women and men relate to each other
• Identity: How women and men perceive themselves

The ideology of gender thus contains norms and rules regarding appropriate behavior and determines attributes; it also reproduces a range of beliefs and customs to support these norms and social rules.

—Adapted from www.hku.hk/ccpl/events/training/2003/27032003/4.doc

Briefly jot down your response to these explanations and any questions they raise for you:
3. Consider this list of characters and the descriptions, adapted from a well-known reader’s guide to the play. As you read, circle the words that are “gendered”:

**Willy Loman:** An insecure, self-deluded traveling salesman. Willy believes wholeheartedly in the American Dream of easy success and wealth, but he never achieves it. Nor do his sons fulfill his hope that they will succeed where he has failed. When Willy’s illusions begin to fail under the pressing realities of his life, his mental health begins to unravel. The overwhelming tensions caused by this disparity, as well as those caused by the societal imperatives that drive Willy, form the essential conflict of *Death of a Salesman*.

**Biff Loman:** Willy’s 34-year-old elder son. Biff led a charmed life in high school as a football star with scholarship prospects, good male friends, and fawning female admirers. He failed math, however, and did not have enough credits to graduate. Since then, his kleptomania has gotten him fired from every job that he has held. Biff represents Willy’s vulnerable, poetic, tragic side. Biff cannot ignore his instincts, which tell him to abandon Willy’s paralyzing dreams and move out West to work with his hands. He ultimately fails to reconcile his life with Willy’s expectations of him.

**Linda Loman:** Willy’s loyal, loving wife. Linda suffers through Willy’s grandiose dreams and self-delusions. Occasionally, she seems to be taken in by Willy’s self-deluded hopes for future glory and success, but at other times, she seems far more realistic and less fragile than her husband. She has nurtured the family through all of Willy’s misguided attempts at success, and her emotional strength and perseverance support Willy until his collapse.

**Happy Loman:** Willy’s 32-year-old younger son. Happy has lived in Biff’s shadow all of his life, but he compensates by nurturing his relentless sex drive and professional ambition. Happy represents Willy’s sense of self-importance, ambition, and blind servitude to societal expectations. Although he works as an assistant to an assistant buyer in a department store, Happy presents himself as supremely important. Additionally, he practices bad business ethics and sleeps with the girlfriends of his superiors.

**Charley:** Willy’s next-door neighbor. Charley owns a successful business and his son, Bernard, is a wealthy, important lawyer. Willy is jealous of Charley’s success. Charley gives Willy money to pay his bills, and Willy reveals at one point, choking back tears, that Charley is his only friend.

**Bernard:** Bernard is Charley’s son and an important, successful lawyer. Although Willy used to mock Bernard for studying hard, Bernard always loved Willy’s sons dearly and regarded Biff as a hero. Bernard’s success is difficult for Willy to accept because his own sons’ lives do not measure up.
**Ben:** Willy’s wealthy older brother. Ben has recently died and appears only in Willy’s “daydreams.” Willy regards Ben as a symbol of the success that he so desperately craves for himself and his sons.

**The Woman:** Willy’s mistress when Happy and Biff were in high school. The Woman’s attention and admiration boost Willy’s fragile ego. When Biff catches Willy in his hotel room with The Woman, he loses faith in his father, and his dream of passing math and going to college dies.

**Howard Wagner:** Willy’s boss. Howard inherited the company from his father, whom Willy regarded as “a masterful man” and “a prince.” Though much younger than Willy, Howard treats Willy with condescension and eventually fires him, despite Willy’s wounded assertions that he named Howard at his birth.

**Stanley:** A waiter at Frank’s Chop House. Stanley and Happy seem to be friends, or at least acquaintances, and they banter about and ogle Miss Forsythe together before Biff and Willy arrive at the restaurant.

**Miss Forsythe and Letta:** Two young women whom Happy and Biff meet at Frank’s Chop House. It seems likely that Miss Forsythe and Letta are prostitutes, judging from Happy’s repeated comments about their moral character and the fact that they are “on call.”

—Adapted from www.sparknotes.com/lit/salesman/

3a. In what ways do these descriptions contribute to the gendered stereotypes of the characters?

3b. Select one of the four members of the Loman family. Describe the ways in which this character may be held hostage to social expectations of gender and say how those expectations affect the character’s actions within the play. Now, as you think about the film version of the play, how did the social construction of gender affect the actor’s portrayal of the character?
ACTIVITY 21

Getting to the Heart of the “Other”: The Postcolonial Lens and Heart of Darkness

THE WHAT

Let’s first review the basic tenants of postcolonial theory.

Postcolonial Literary Theory

Assumptions

1. Colonialism is a powerful, usually destructive historical force that shapes not only the political futures of the countries involved but also the identities of colonized and colonizing people.
2. Successful colonialism depends on a process of “othering” the people colonized. That is, the colonized people are seen as dramatically different from and lesser than the colonizers.
3. Because of this, literature written in colonizing cultures often distorts the experiences and realities of colonized people. Literature written by colonized people often includes attempts to articulate more empowered identities and reclaim cultures in the face of colonization.

Strategies

1. Search the text for references to colonization or current and formerly colonized people. In these references, how are the colonized people portrayed? How is the process of colonization portrayed?
2. Consider what images of “others” or processes of “othering” are present in the text. How are these “others” portrayed?

Analyze how the text deals with cultural conflicts between the colonizing culture and colonized or traditional culture.

Here’s another definition of postcolonial theory:

Postcolonial literary theory attempts to isolate perspectives in literature that grow out of colonial rule and the mindset it creates. On one hand, it can examine the ways in which a colonizing society imposes its worldview on the peoples it subjugates,
making them “objects” of observation and denying them the power to define themselves. The colonizers are the “subjects,” those who take action and create realities out of the beliefs they hold to be important. On another hand, it can focus on the experiences of colonized peoples and the disconnection they feel from their own identities. Postcolonialism also focuses on attempts of formerly colonized societies to reassert the identities they wish to claim for themselves, including national identities and cultural identities. When this lens is used to examine the products of colonization, it focuses on reclamation of self-identity.

One thing that postcolonial theory shares with deconstruction is the attempt to isolate “false binaries,” categories that function by including dominant perspectives and excluding the rest, relegating outsiders to the status of “other.” Colonized people are always seen as existing outside the prevailing system of beliefs or values. As the dominant ideology asserts itself, it creates a sense of normalcy among the ideas of the colonizers and a sense of the exotic, the inexplicable, and the strange among the customs and ideas of “the other.”

In your own words, what is postcolonial literary theory?

THE WHY

Here’s how one teacher explains why she teaches the postcolonial lens:

“In other words, I am fully convinced that students can come to a clear understanding of the poststructuralist and gendered notions of socially-constructed subjectivity, and of postcolonial perspectives that reveal the presence of ‘the self’ in ‘the other’ (the master in the slave; the slave in the master), if they can find personal and cultural connections to those peoples they would otherwise perceive as antithetical to them. (Few of my mainstream American students can imagine there is any commonality, any common humanity, between themselves and ‘Communists’ or ‘Arabs’ or ‘lesbians’ or ‘gays’ or any of those groups demonized so often in our national consciousness. The task that I face in my classrooms most often is to allow students to see a hint of that common humanity, to deconstruct their preconceptions as a way to see that others, no matter how putatively different, might in other circumstances and ideological convictions than those we presently inhabit and uphold, be our colleagues, our comrades, our friends.)”

—Lindsay Aegerter
Respond to this quotation in a short paragraph:

THE HOW

1. Rephrase from a postcolonial perspective the following sentence: 
   *Christopher Columbus discovered America.*

2. Read the poem “Sure You Can Ask Me a Personal Question.” In groups of three or four, construct a postcolonial reading and explain it below.
THE TEXT

Using the table below, list all the characters you have met in the novel in terms of their stance as the colonized and the colonizers.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Colonizers</th>
<th>The Colonized</th>
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If it is true that the master is in the slave and the slave is in the master, select one character from each column and explain how they embody both categories. Work with one other person on this question.

The Questions

Using the postcolonial lens, what kind of questions emerge from your reading of this text? Write at least four questions below.
ACTIVITY 22

Reading Nonfiction and Art: A New Historical Approach

The Emancipation Proclamation

Spend some time studying the painting located at http://upload.wikimedia.org/wiki-pedia/commons/1/11/Stephens-reading-proclamation-1863.jpeg
Then write a brief paragraph that describes your response to it.

Now read the historical document located at http://www.nps.gov/ncro/anti/emancipation.html

Return to the painting. What do you notice that you didn’t notice before?

This painting was completed in 1863. How do you think your reaction to the painting might differ significantly from the response of the artist’s contemporaries?
“How It Feels to Be Colored Me”


This essay was written in 1928, 65 years after the Emancipation Proclamation. Does Hurston’s essay reflect an “emancipated” reality for African Americans?

In what ways is the historical context of the essay important to your understanding of it?

Does her essay revise your viewing of the painting?

What elements of Hurston’s essay seem relevant today? Which seem outdated?

Metaquestion: How does history shape and reshape our reading of artistic and literary works?
ACTIVITY 23

The Interplay of Nonfiction and Poetry

Please read the poem “In Response to Executive Order 9066: All Americans of Japanese Descent Must Report to Relocation Centers” by Dwight Okita, available at dwightland.homestead.com/ABOUTPOEMS.html

Using the reader-response lens, write your own personal reaction to the poem:

Now look at the historical document on which the poem is based, located at www.archives.gov/historical-docs/todays-doc/?dod-date=219

How does this historical document enhance your understanding of the context of the poem? Contrast the way that language is used in the poem and in the historical document.

Now read what the poet Dwight Okita says about the poem, available at dwightland.homestead.com/ABOUTPOEMS.html

How does this additional information change your reading of the poem?

Do you think this background is necessary to gain a full understanding of the poem?

Metaquestion: How does the poem and your reading of it change your understanding of the historical event represented in “Executive Order 9066”?
Deconstruction

Deconstruction is, by far, the most difficult critical lens for people to understand. It is an intellectually sophisticated theory that confuses many very smart people, but we think so much of you, that we know you can understand it. It is a postmodern theory, and like most postmodernism, it questions many of the basic assumptions that have guided us in the past. In the traditional study of literature, those basic assumptions include:

• language is stable and has meaning we can all agree on
• the author is in control of the text s/he writes
• works of literature have an internal consistency
• works of literature have an external relevance
• you can take the author’s or poet’s word for what s/he writes
• there is a set of interpretive tools that you can reliably use to interpret a literary text

Deconstruction calls all of these assumptions into question. It asks you to read resistantly, to not take a work of literature at its face value and to question the assumptions, both literary and philosophical, that the work or the author asks you to make. It is this kind of resistance that you folks are so good at. And it is that resistance, that ability to look beyond what seems to be intended, that will be a useful skill in the “real world.” It helps us to become careful and skeptical consumers of culture, not passive recipients of “great works.”

Deconstructionist critics ask us to probe beyond the surface or recognizable constructs of a finished story or text. By “construct,” we mean something that has been constructed by mental synthesis. That is, constructs are created when we combine things we know through our senses or from our experiences. They do not exist naturally; they are products of our intervention into the order of the universe. When we reexamine and challenge the constructs employed by the literary writer, we “deconstruct.” The term does not simply mean to take it apart. It means we need to look thoughtfully beyond the surface of the text—“to peel away like an onion the layers of constructed meanings.” It doesn’t mean the same thing as analyzing. In the traditional sense, when we analyze a piece, we put it back the way it was and appreciate it more. When we deconstruct a piece of literature, we realize that there is something wrong or incomplete or dishonest or unintended with how it was put together in the first place. Here is one good explanation of deconstruction:
Having been written by a human being with unresolved conflicts and contradictory emotions, a story may disguise rather than reveal the underlying anxieties or perplexities of the author. Below the surface, unresolved tensions or contradictions may account for the true dynamics of the story. The story may have one message for the ordinary unsophisticated reader and another for the reader who responds to its subtext, its sub-surface ironies. Readers who deconstruct a text will be “resistant” readers. They will not be taken in by what a story says on the surface but will try to penetrate the disguises of the text. . . They may engage in radical rereading of familiar classics. (Guth & Rico, 1996, p. 366)

Here is another useful definition:

Deconstruction is a strategy for revealing the underlayers of meaning in a text that were suppressed or assumed in order for it to take its actual form. . . . Texts are never simply unitary but include resources that run counter to their assertions and/or their authors’ intentions. (Appignanesi & Garratt, 1995, p. 80)

We’re going to play with deconstruction today in three steps: first with some common metaphors, then with a traditional poem, and then with some texts you’ve read for this class.

1. Unpacking metaphors:

Let’s take some metaphors and see if there is anything false or unintended about their meaning. Under each, please write the obvious surface meaning, and an unintended meaning that may lie beneath the surface.

   **Love is a rose.**

   Intended:

   Unintended:

   **You are the sunshine of my life.**

   Intended:

   Unintended:

   **The test was a bear.**

   Intended:

   Unintended:
2. Deconstructing a text:

Let’s read the following poem, one that’s often subject to traditional analysis:

_Dead Be Not Proud_

Death be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for though art not so;
For those whom thou think’st thou dost overthrow
Die not, poor death, nor canst thou kill me.
From rest and sleep which but thy pictures be
Much pleasure—then from thee much more should flow;
And soonest our best men with thee do go,
Rest of their bones and souls delivery.
Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings and desperate men,
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell;
And poppy and charms can make us sleep as well,
And better than thy stroke. Why swell’st thou then?
One short sleep passed, we wake eternally,
And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die.

—John Donne

What is the poem supposed to say? How would you approach it for, say, the AP exam? What traditional tools of analysis might you employ to unpack the meaning of the text?

Where does the poem break down? How might it work against the author’s intentions? Write down some specific places where the text falls apart.
3. Reconsidering a reading:

Now, think of a poem, short story or novel you’ve read that cannot be taken at face value, that may reveal, because of internal inconsistencies or unintended conflict and the failure of language to really communicate what we mean (even in the hands of gifted writers), a mixed message or an unintended meaning. On your own or with a partner, please complete the following sentences about the text. We will ask you to detach this page from the handout and turn it in.

Name(s):

Text:

When I deconstruct this text, here’s what happens. I think the main idea the author/poet was trying to construct was:

But this construct really doesn’t work. The idea falls apart. The language and construction of the text isn’t able to convey what the author meant to convey. There are places in the text where it just doesn’t work. For example:

So, in the end, even though the author meant the work to say:

it really said:

(Optional) I’d also like to say that:
ACTIVITY 25

A Modest Proposal: Deconstruction and Nonfiction

Deconstruction reminds us of the instability of meaning. This is because people use language to name categories into which our experiences don’t neatly fit. Similarly, satire requires us to construct a particular meaning based on an understanding of such categories—one that uses and then reverses their meanings. Let’s see how deconstruction works with this very famous nonfiction essay, “A Modest Proposal”* by Jonathan Swift

1. Summarize the literal meaning of the piece. What exactly does Swift say he is proposing?

2. Give some examples of words or phrases that fit into the following categories that Swift presents in his essay. For example, what happens when he describes “a child just dropped from its dam”?

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<tr>
<th>People</th>
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</table>
3. How do these categories contribute to the literal meaning of the essay?

4. In what ways do these categories become unstable or imprecise and betray themselves to reveal a different meaning?

5. Find three or four sentences that lead you to believe Swift intends a different meaning than the one that is directly stated.

6. Rewrite your response to #1, restating what you think is the intended meaning of the essay.

7. How does Swift use language to convey one thing and mean another?

8. How might the social class lens provide a useful reading to this piece? If you read this piece through that lens, what might be brought into sharper relief?

*Note to teachers: this essay can be easily found online.
ACTIVITY 26

“On the Subway,” by Sharon Olds: The Gender Lens

1. Read the poem aloud in your group.

2. Using the theory cards, glossaries and any other information that you have, please summarize what you think it means to apply a gender lens to a text.

3. As a group, underline lines that are particularly relevant to a gendered reading.

4. As a group, complete this sentence (more than one meaning statement might result).
   Using the gender lens, we think the poem means
   because

5. What larger questions about society does this reading raise for you?

6. Pick a reporter to summarize your group’s findings.

1. Read the poem aloud in your group.

2. Using the theory cards, glossaries, and any other information that you have, please summarize what you think it means to apply a formalist lens to a text.

3. As a group, list some of the important poetic devices that Olds employs to convey her meaning.

4. Underline lines that contain those poetic devices.

5. As a group, complete this sentence (more than one meaning statement might result).
Based on a formalist analysis we think the poem means

because

6. Does this reading raise larger questions about society for you?

7. Pick a reporter to summarize your group’s findings.
ACTIVITY 28

“On the Subway,” by Sharon Olds:
The Social Class Lens

1. Read the poem aloud in your group.

2. Using the theory cards, glossaries, and any other information that you have, please summarize what you think it means to apply a social class lens to a text.

3. As a group, underline lines that are particularly relevant to a social class reading.

4. As a group, complete this sentence (more than one meaning statement might result).
   Based on a social class reading, we think the poem means

   because

5. What larger questions about society does this reading raise for you?

6. Pick a reporter to summarize your group’s findings.
ACTIVITY 29


1. Read the poem aloud in your group.

2. Using the theory cards, glossaries, and any other information that you have, please summarize what you think it means to apply a reader-response lens to a text.

3. Have each person list the personal qualities and/or personal experiences that are relevant to the poem.

4. Have each person underline lines that are particularly relevant to those personal experiences.

5. Have each person in the group complete the following sentence:
   Based on my own reading, I think the poem means

   because

6. Pick a reporter to summarize your group’s findings.
"Ode to Family Photographs": Three Perspectives

The Reader-Response Perspective

Reread the poem with these questions in mind and then discuss them with three other classmates:

- What family photos of your own come to mind as you read the poem?
- Who is your usual family photographer? Why?
- What might people be able to tell about your family from the photographs?

The Formalist Perspective

Reread the poem with these questions in mind and then discuss them with three other classmates:

- List some of the images that are conjured as you read the poem.
- In what ways is this different from most poems you’ve read?
- How would you describe the tone of the poem? Support your response with specific lines or phrases from the poem.

The Biographical Perspective

Read the brief biography of Gary Soto that we provided and then reread the poem with these questions in mind. Discuss them with three other classmates:

- What images or specific references do the two pieces share?
- What else do the pieces seem to have in common?
- In what ways does the information in the bio affect your reading of the poem?
Please consider the stories from Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* from the perspective of the four theories listed below. Each group will consider a particular lens and then we will discuss this together as a whole class. Note, too, that your paper assignment is also related to this exercise. Here is a list of the stories: “The Things They Carried,” “Love,” “Spin,” “On the Rainy River,” “Enemies,” “Friends,” “How to Tell a True War Story,” “The Dentist,” “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong,” “Stockings,” “Church,” “The Man I Killed,” “Ambush,” “Style,” “Speaking of Courage,” “Notes,” “In the Field,” “Good Form,” “Field Trip,” “The Ghost Soldiers,” “Night Life,” “The Lives of the Dead.”

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<tr>
<th>Reader Response</th>
<th>Historical</th>
<th>Feminist/Gender</th>
<th>Marxist/Social Class</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Which stories lend themselves to this particular lens?</td>
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<td>Cite specific textual passage(s) that support this kind of reading:</td>
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<td>Interpret at least one character through this lens.</td>
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### Reader Response vs. Historical, Feminist/Gender, Marxist/Social Class

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<th>Reader Response</th>
<th>Historical</th>
<th>Feminist/Gender</th>
<th>Marxist/Social Class</th>
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<tr>
<td>If you look through this lens, what questions emerge?</td>
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<td>If these stories are to be considered as a coherent whole, what is the nature of the “glue” that holds them together?</td>
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<td>Do you believe in this reading? Why or why not?</td>
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ACTIVITY 32

Contemporary Literary Theory and Shrek

First, consider the opening and the closing minutes of the film. In what ways are we invited to read this film like a story? What are some of the assumptions about stories that you have internalized? (Some theorists call this a story grammar.) How do you know that the film will resist the traditional story line?

Next, let’s review the basic assumptions of the five lenses on the other side. Fill in each square in the accompanying table as we discuss the lenses.

View the film. Write down particular moments that strike you on a separate piece of paper. Then fit those moments under the appropriate lens if it works.

Now, with a partner, think about the messages that Shrek may be trying to convey. Together, discover the significance of Shrek from the perspective of each lens.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>LENS</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Social Class</th>
<th>Deconstruction</th>
<th>Archetypal</th>
<th>Reader-Response</th>
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<tr>
<td>What are the basic assumptions of this lens?</td>
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<td>List at least two episodes, moments, or incidents that seem to exemplify this perspective.</td>
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<td>Given this perspective, what is the film trying to say?</td>
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The Interplay of Fiction and Nonfiction

“Everyday Use”: A SAMPLER OF APPROACHES

Nonfiction can help us read and appreciate fictional works. Let’s see how a nonfiction essay can illuminate our understanding of a short story, even after we view it through two other lenses.

Approach One: The Reader-Response Lens—A Pre-Reading Activity
“Object Lesson” or Everyday Uses

- Bring an object from home that has some sentimental value to you. Briefly describe the history of this object and how it came to be in your possession.

- Why did you choose this particular object? Summarize what it means to you. Does this object represent anything besides itself (e.g., ring symbolizes love)?

- Does anyone else in your family have any use for or feelings about this object? Explain. (This question is particularly relevant to our reading of “Everyday Use.”)

- Now, get into groups with three other people. Share your objects and responses to questions 1–3 with each other. Spend about 10 to 15 minutes doing this.

- Respond individually to what you’ve just done as a group. Write a brief (four- to five-sentence) reaction to something someone in your group said about his/her object.
**Approach Two: The Formalist Lens—A Close-Reading Activity**

Now let’s read “Everyday Use” by Alice Walker. Review our formalist theory card and use the formalist lens to do a close reading. As you read, consider the following questions:

- Who is the speaker of the story?
- How would you describe the tone of the story?
- Find some of the most striking examples of figurative language. How does this use of language help establish the mood of the story as well as the characters?
- What might the quilt symbolize?
- What is the significance of the title?
- What is the purpose or overall theme of the story?

**Approach Three: The Biographical Lens Using Nonfiction**

Read Alice Walker’s essay, “In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens.”

- After you read the essay, skim through the story again. What do you notice that you didn’t notice before?

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of having your students read this essay before they read the story?

- Quilts appear both in the essay and the story. How does the mention of the quilt in the essay affect your reading of the story?

- How does reading this essay inform your response to/interpretation of the story? Does it change what you think the purpose of the story might be?
ACTIVITY 34

From Reading Words to Reading the World:
Critical Lenses in Literature and in Life

We’ve spent a lot of time this year focusing on critical lenses. For a culminating activity, we would like you to reflect on the ways in which you personally have made sense of the lenses as a tool for reading texts and the world.

1. Reflect on our reading and discussion over this past year. Which lenses did you find particularly useful, interesting, or thought provoking? Which lenses seemed to offer the most explanatory power for your reading of literary texts? Rate the following lenses from 1 through 8, where 1 is the lowest rating and 8 is the highest:

______ reader-response theory
______ formalist theory (New Criticism)
______ archetypal theory
______ postcolonial theory
______ historical theory
______ psychological theory
______ gender theory
______ social class theory

In one to two paragraphs, explain why you have ranked the lenses as you did.
2. Now, think of something you’ve heard about or seen outside of class that struck you as worth thinking about.

It could be related to school:

- an interaction between two people
- a school policy
- a social group
- academics
- athletics
- something about the building itself
- how the school day is structured

OR

Something outside of school:

- a state, national, or world event or circumstance
- a political situation or event
- a family situation
- a personal event

Describe this event or issue and explain why it is important.

Consider this event from at least two of the lenses we’ve been working with. What do you notice or what questions emerge for you as you apply these critical perspectives to that event? How do these lenses affect or increase your understanding of the event/issue?

3. How do you think the multiple perspectives can help you understand some things about yourself and your life outside of school?

ACTIVITY 35

Critical Encounters: Reading the World

Literary theory raises those issues which are often left submerged beneath the mass of information contained in the course, and it also asks questions about how the institution of great literature works. What makes a “great work” great? Who makes the decisions about what will be taught? Why are authors grouped into certain historical periods? The answers to fundamental questions like these are often unarticulated assumptions on the part of both the professor (teacher) and the students.

Socrates said that the unexamined life is not worth living. . . . Literary theory is at its best when it helps us realize what we are really doing when we study literature.

—S. Bonnycastle

1. Based on our reading as well as class discussions, briefly describe in your own words, the following literary theories. (Spend no more than a few minutes on this part of the exercise.)

   Psychological criticism:

   Feminist/gender literary theory:

   Marxist/social class theory:

   Reader-response theory:

   Other? (Choose one as a group):

2. In groups of three or four, select a literary work with which you are all familiar. It could be a poem, a short story, a play, or a novel. Or, focus on the novel you are currently using for your reader’s choice. Then, think of two theories that would be fruitful to use to explore that text. In the spaces below, briefly describe how each of those two theories might be used to illuminate the text.

   Theory 1:
3. Now, think of something you’ve read, heard, or seen outside of class that particularly struck you as worth thinking about. It could be an interaction between two people, a MTV video, a song, a film or a scene from a film, a magazine article or ad. Briefly explain it below.

4. What lens might you use to help you understand this event or artifact? How would that lens affect or increase your understanding?

5. Can we use critical lenses to “read” the world? Explain.

6. What, if anything, do you find difficult about reading literature with critical lenses?
ACTIVITY 36

Theory Relay: Native Son

For the next hour in groups of three or four, please consider Native Son from a variety of theoretical perspectives: reader response, historical/biographical, feminist/gender, and Marxist/social class. We’ll be doing this as a kind of relay. There are four theory stations around the room. Spend approximately 10 minutes at each station. Each person should turn in one of these sheets to your teacher on Monday. Make certain you’ve completed the journal entry at the end of the sheet.

Name:

Group Members:

Reader-Response Station

Reread the explanation of reader response and study your reader-response diagram. In the space below, write at least three meaning statements that are the result of your personal interaction with the text.

1.

2.

3.
Historical/Biographical Station

Skim together “How Bigger Was Born” (in your copy of Native Son) and skim the biographical articles that you find at this station. How does what you’ve learned, as well as any additional experience of reading you’ve had with other works of Richard Wright, affect and inform your understanding of Native Son?

Feminist/Gender Station

Consider the quotation you find at the feminist/gender station. As a group, construct an interpretation of the quotation that is informed by your collective understanding of feminist literary theory. When you consider Native Son from a feminist perspective, what characters, incidents, or themes are brought into greater relief? Write your response below.

Marxist/Social Class Station

Consider the quotation you find at the Marxist/social class station. As a group, construct an interpretation of the quotation that is informed by your understanding of Marxist literary theory. When you consider Native Son from a Marxist perspective, what characters, incidents or themes are brought into greater relief? Write your response below.

***Journal Entry:

Reflect on your group’s efforts this hour to read Native Son through a variety of critical lenses. Which lens seemed to be most consistent with the intention of the novel. Which lens was the most difficult to apply? Which was the most informative? (This entry should be at least two full paragraphs. Write it on a separate piece of paper that you attach to this sheet.)
1. What is the feminist/gender lens?

Feminist literary criticism helps us look at literature in a different light. It applies the philosophies and perspectives of feminism to the literature we read. There are many different kinds of feminist literary theory. Some theorists examine the language and symbols that are used and how that language and use of symbols is “gendered.” Others remind us that men and women write differently and analyze at how the gender of the author affects how literature is written. Many feminist critics look at how the characters, especially the female characters, are portrayed and ask us to consider how the portrayal of female characters “reinforces or undermines” sexual stereotypes (Lynn, 2010). Feminist literary theory also suggests that the gender of the reader often affects our response to a text. For example, feminist critics may claim that certain male writers address their readers as if they were all men and exclude the female reader.

Like feminism itself, feminist literary theory asks us to consider the relationships between men and women and their relative roles in society. Much feminist literary theory reminds us that the relationship between men and women in society is often unequal and reflects a particular patriarchal ideology. Those unequal relationships may appear in a variety of ways in the production of literature and within literary texts. Feminist theorists invite us to pay particular attention to the patterns of thought, behavior, values, and power in those relationships.

Feminist literary critics remind us that literary values, conventions, and even the production of literature have themselves been historically shaped by men. They invite us to consider writings by women, both new and forgotten, and also ask us to consider viewing familiar literature through a feminist perspective.

2. How do we apply the feminist/gender lens?

We apply it by closely examining the portrayal of the characters, both female and male, the language of the text, the attitude of the author, and the relationship between the characters. We also consider the comments the author seems to be making about society as a whole.
3. Application: Looking through the feminist/gender lens

Select two female characters from novels with which you are very familiar. They could be from works we have read together or from texts you have read in previous English classes. For example, you might choose Daisy from *The Great Gatsby*, Hester Prynne from *The Scarlet Letter*, or Sonya from *Crime and Punishment*.

Name each character and write two descriptive statements for each—one from a traditional masculine perspective and the second from a feminist perspective.

**Character 1:**

Traditional statement:

Feminist/gender statement:

**Character 2:**

Traditional statement:

Feminist/gender statement:

4. Try to interpret this concrete poem in two ways, from a traditional perspective and from a feminist/gender perspective:

—Pedro Xisto
5. Can the feminist lens be useful in everyday life? Please write a sentence about the following objects or situations using a traditional perspective and then applying the feminist lens:

- Mount Rushmore

- The Miss America pageant

- Hillary Clinton’s bid for the Democratic nomination for President

- The popularity and ups and downs of Britney Spears/Paris Hilton/Lindsay Lohan

- The hooplah surrounding Sarah Palin as Vice-Presidential candidate

- “Ugly Betty”

6. Can you think of anything that has happened to you or to a friend of yours in the past two weeks that could be better explained or understood through a feminist/gender lens? Pick a partner and share stories.