



AP Lit. Critical Lens Theories- Defined



****Do not throw this away. We will refer to it all year.**

Literary theories were developed as a means to understand the various ways people read and filter texts through various and sometimes multiple viewpoints.

All critical theories are lenses through which we can see texts. There is nothing to say that one is better than another or that you should only read according to any of them. 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.

As you read, consider shifting your perspective or viewpoint, or the LENSES THROUGH WHICH YOU READ often. What lenses might offer you more *insight* into the text?

Hint: It’s not always about what IS there, but also about what is NOT present (or absent).

FEMINIST/GENDER LENS: [category: marginalization]

A

View society in a “patriarchal” and “heterosexual” way, which has hindered or prevented women and or socially unaccepted forms of sexuality from realizing their full potential. Through using this lens, readings reveal these groups are viewed negatively (or an absence of definition, inferior, or as the “Other.” 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 continue to perpetrate patriarchal perspectives.

Questions and Strategies for Using this Lens:

- Consider the gender of the author and the characters: what role does gender play in the text?
- Observe how gender stereotypes might be reinforced or contradicted. Try to see how the text reflects or distorts the place men or women have in society.
- What roles does gender/sexuality play in this work? (Examine power relations).
- Imagine reading the text from the point of view of someone from the opposite gender.

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.

****In feminist pieces, or especially more modern pieces, when the focus re-centers on the feminist viewpoint, then the male becomes the “Other.”**

MARXIST LENS: [category: marginalization- \$\$ and power]

B

Views society based on the economic and cultural theory of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Assumes that each society is made up of a set of concepts, beliefs, values, and ways of thinking influenced by economic and class structures.

Questions and Strategies for Using this Lens:

- Consider who has the power/money and who doesn’t.
- What role does power, money, or class play in this work?
- What happens as a result in differences in power/money?
- Relate context of work to social-class of author and/or time period
- 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.

C **PSYCHOLOGICAL AND PSYCHOANALYTIC LENS:** [category: analyze author/characters]
Views text as an expression, in fictional form, of the personality, state of mind, feelings, and desires of its author. Also analyzes the same for the characters in terms of desires and thoughts versus actions. Looks for the distinction between conscious and unconscious motives of characters and author.

Questions and Strategies for Using this Lens:

- Consider the author's personality to explain and interpret a text
- What psychological theories are present in the characters (Oedipal complex, obsessive compulsive, desire repression, denial, guilt)?
- What repressed material is expressed in imagery or symbols? Thoughts instead vs. actions?

Oftentimes:

- Reference to the author's personality is used to explain and interpret a literary work.
- Reference to an author's works used to establish, biographically, the personality of the author.
- Believing that reading an author's text is a way of experiencing the consciousness of its author.

This theory requires that we investigate the psychology of a character or an author to figure out the deeper meaning (although this can also be considered **Biographical or Historical Lenses**).

D **DECONSTRUCTION LENS:** [category: author/history/etc. unimportant]

Origin: French philosopher who wrote extensively that texts need to be deconstructed/torn apart, like a dissection, to determine underlying flaws in logic and structure. He declared literature means nothing because language means nothing. In other words, we cannot say that we know the "meaning" of a text because there is no way of knowing. An attempt to break apart the assumptions we take for granted.

Thesis: We can challenge traditional assumptions by unraveling the ideas that ground those traditions. Furthermore, life is multifaceted and includes many viewpoints to consider.

Characteristics: The world follows a binary, or oppositional structure: good/evil, rich/poor, male/female, smart/stupid, etc. We can know something only by describing its opposite

Examples: Reversal of values approved by society: Batman is evil because he works outside the law, while the Joker is good because he is creative, intelligent, and funny.

Unravel Traditional Beliefs: "The Declaration of Independence" espouses freedoms like freedom of speech and to assemble, however, these were used in opposition to England so the colonist could rebel. Multifaceted Viewpoints: Howard Zinn writes from the Arawaks' perspective in *The People's History of the United States* to give a voice to a society that had no voice in American history.

**Disney has recently marketed this by exploring villain's backstories (*Maleficent*)

E **NEW CRITISIM LENS:** [category: **DO NOT** analyze author/context/history; just the text]

Views text as existing independently. It is against the prevailing concern of critics, with the lives and psychology of authors, with social background, and with literary history. Meaning is discovered by doing a close reading of the text itself and not by examining outside sources.

Questions and Strategies for Using this Lens:

- Focus on the meanings and interactions of words, figures of speech, and symbols.
- Look for complex interrelations and ambiguities within a text.
- Analyze how parallels are established and create a unity within the text

F **HISTORICAL LENS:** [category: author/history/context/etc. VERY important]

Necessary to analyze a text's specific historical contextual information: 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. This would include information about the author.

Questions and Strategies:

- If the author is writing on a debatable issue does he or she give proper consideration to all sides of the debate? Does he or she seem to have a bias?
- Research the author's time (political history, intellectual history, economic history, etc.) and relate this information to the work.
- Does the text consider worldviews widely held at the time? Or the opposite? Or those barely considered?
- Research the author's life and relate the information to the text. Why did the author write it? What is the author's worldview?

A Subset of this Lens: POST-COLONIAL LENS: [category: marginalization]

Examines how other cultures are viewed in terms of an overpowering Western literature base.

- Looks at issues of colonization and imperialism (power structure)
- Rejects the idea of marginalized people as "Others"
- Celebrates "hybridity" (existing in two cultures at once)

G **RACE LENS:** [category: marginalization]

Reading a text for its issues of race, heritage, and ethnicity.

Questions and Strategies:

- Analyze how the text discusses race, heritage, and ethnicity. Or, consider what images of "Others" are presented in the text. How are these "Others" portrayed?
- Are there any unfair stereotypes? Are there any generalities that hold truth?
- Analyze the text for how it deals with cultural conflicts, particularly between majority and minority groups.

H **ARCHETYPAL LENS:** [category: structure and patterns]

Focuses on the structure of stories. Identifies actions that a story can contain and claims all stories pick from this list (think The Hero's Journey). Also focuses on the specific character types that are repeated within all stories—hero, villain, trickster, orphan, mentor etc. "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). Examples: the death-rebirth pattern, 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.

I **READER RESPONSE LENS:** [category: NO author/history/etc. - just the text and YOU]

Reading a text for personal meaning. The work is not about the author's intention, but instead it is about what goes on in a reader's mind. 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. Through this interaction, meaning is made.

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.

Questions and Strategies:

- In what ways is the text familiar to your life? Think of events in the story, the types of characters, or the setting... Can you relate to it on a personal level?
- In what ways is the text different than your life?
- How did the text affect you?
- How has the text increased your interest in the subject matter?
- How has the text changed your worldview?

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*, etc. 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:

Another Example: What is the meaning of the below concrete poem by Pedro Xisto →



Another Example: Punctuate the following sentence:

A woman without her man is nothing

Another Example: What happened?

A man and his son are driving in a car one day, when they get into a fatal accident. The man is killed instantly. The boy is knocked unconscious, but he is still alive. He is rushed to hospital, and will need immediate surgery. The doctor enters the emergency room, looks at the boy, and says...

"I can't operate on this boy, he is my son."

Little Miss Muffet

By Russell Baker

One of the fascinating aspects of American English is its diversity, and one of the causes of this diversity is the specialized vocabularies (called "discourses") 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.

Event Facilitator: 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 preestablish 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 the 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 American 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, 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.

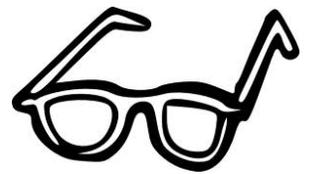
(The child was sent home when the conference broke for lunch. It was agreed that he was too immature to subtract anything from the sum of human understanding.)



Little Miss Muffet

Little Miss Muffet
Sat on a tuffet,
Eating her curds and whey;
Along came a spider,
Who sat down beside her,
And frightened Miss Muffet away.





Title: _____

By Sylvia Plath

Overnight, very

Whitely, discreetly,

Very quietly

Our toes, our noses

Take hold on the loam,

Acquire the air.

Nobody sees us,

Stops us, betrays us;

The small grains make room.

Soft fists insist on

Heaving the needles,

The leafy bedding,

Even the paving.

Our hammers, our rams,

Earless and eyeless,

Perfectly voiceless,

Widen the crannies,

Shoulder through holes. We

Diet on water,

On crumbs of shadow,

Bland-mannered, asking

Little or nothing.

So many of us!

So many of us!

We are shelves, we are

Tables, we are meek,

We are edible,

Nudgers and shovers

In spite of ourselves.

Our kind multiplies:

We shall by morning

Inherit the earth.

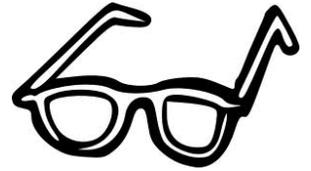
Our foot's in the door

Lens: _____

Subject of the poem: _____

Analysis:

Nursery Rhyme Lens Assignment



Similarly to the "Miss Muffet" activity, your task is to select a Nursery Rhyme or children's poem and write 2 different interpretations of that text using 2 different lenses. Your analysis should thoroughly and closely explore the meaning of that text through the eyes of that lens.

We will be sharing these in class. Make them strong analytically and have fun with them!

Format (in either your journal or a Google Doc)

Nursery Rhyme Title:

Nursery Rhyme Text: (full text)

Lens #1: _____

Analysis paragraph through that lens:

Nursery Rhyme Title:

Nursery Rhyme Text: (full text)

Lens #2: _____

Analysis paragraph through that lens: