

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 *all of us interpret according to the lens of one or more 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. Enjoy!

Archetypal Criticism In criticism, "archetype" signifies narrative designs, character types, or images that 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.

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 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.

1. Our civilization is pervasively patriarchal.
2. The concepts of "gender" are largely, if not entirely, cultural constructs, effected by the omnipresent patriarchal biases of our civilization.
3. This patriarchal ideology also pervades those writings that 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 on her looks.

Marx Critique A Marxist critic grounds theory and practice on the economic and cultural theory of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, especiall

