

Critical Theory

Adapted from Deborah Appleman's
Critical Encounters in High School English

Formalist Strategies

- Read closely. You can assume that every aspect is carefully calculated to contribute to the work's unity—figures of speech, point of view, diction, recurrent ideas or events, everything.
- Say how the work is unified: how the various elements work to unify it.
- The methods used in this perspective are those of close reading: 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.



FORM



Structuralism strategies

- Look at the structural elements, such as words, stanzas, chapters, or parts, and at characters, narrators, or speakers to see how they can reveal important contrasts and differences

The word "STRUCTURE" is displayed in a colorful, stylized font. The letters are arranged in a slightly irregular, hand-drawn style. The colors of the letters are: S (green), T (orange), R (red), U (yellow), C (green), T (brown), U (yellow), R (green), and E (green). The background is a light beige or cream color.

Deconstructionist Strategies

- Identify the oppositions in the text. Determine which member appears to be favored, and look for evidence that contradicts that favoring.
- Identify what appears central to the text and what appears to be marginal and excluded.
- Expose the text's indeterminacy. Whereas formalism assumes that you should read a literary work as closely as if it made sense, deconstruction assumed the opposite: that if you read closely enough, the text will fail to make sense—or at least will contradict itself.

CONTRADICTION

Feminist Strategies

- Consider the gender of the author or the characters: what role does gender or sexuality play in this work?
- 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.
- Look at the effects of power drawn from gender within the plot or form.



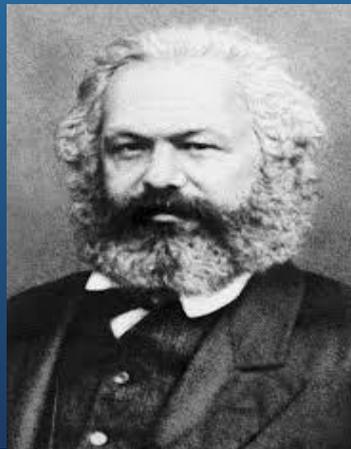
Queer Theorist Strategies

- How does the text portray homosexuality and gender nonconforming individuals?
- What does their presence or absence add or take away from the text?



Marxist Strategies

- Explore the way different groups are represented in texts. Evaluate the level of social realism in the text and how society is portrayed.
- Consider how the text itself is a commodity that reproduces certain social beliefs and practices. Analyze the social effect of the literary work.
- Look at the effects of power drawn from economic or social class.



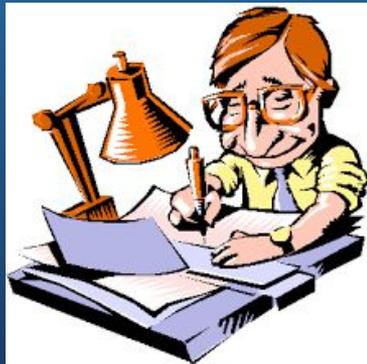
Reader-Response Strategies

- Move through the text in super-slow motion, describing the response of an informed reader at various points.
- Describe your own response when moving through the text.
- React to the text as a whole, embracing and expressing the subjective and personal response it engenders.



Biographical Questions

- Research the author's life, and relate that information to the work.
- Research the author's time (the political history, intellectual history, economic history, and so on), and relate that information to the work.
- Research the systems of meaning available to the author, and relate those systems to the work.



Archetypal Questions:

- Consider the genre of the work (comedy, romance, tragedy) and how it affects the meaning.
- Look for story patterns and symbolic associations, such as black hats, springtime settings, evil stepmothers, and so forth.
- Consider your associations with these symbols as you construct meaning from the text

Post-Colonial Questions

- Search the text for references to colonization or to currently and formerly colonized people. In these references, how are the colonized people portrayed? How is the process of colonization portrayed?
- 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 the colonized or traditional culture.



Allegorical Approach

- In this lens, the text acts as an extended metaphor where characters, settings, and objects all act as symbols for a larger concept.

Disability Theory

- Critical disability theory is a framework for the analysis of disability which examines the meaning, nature, and consequences of disability. The lens explores how individuals with disabilities are portrayed. The approach distinguishes between how the medical and scientific understandings of a disability line up with the societal implications.

Cultural or Ethnic Studies

- This lens focuses on how culture, race, or ethnicity functions within a text. The approach emphasizes how these communities are represented within the text, particularly in comparison to the dominant culture portrayed in a text.

Upon Seeing an Orange



Gender Theory asks:

What possibilities are available to a woman who eats this orange?
To a man?



Formalism asks:



What shape and diameter is the orange?

Marxist Theory Asks:

Who owns the
orange? Who gets to
eat it?



Post colonialism asks:



Who doesn't own the orange? Who took the orange away?

Reader- Response theory asks:

What does the orange taste like? What does the orange remind us of?



Structuralism asks:



How are the orange peel and the flesh differentiated into composite parts of the orange?

Deconstruction asks:

If the orange peel and the flesh are both part of an “orange,” are they not in fact one and the same thing?



Cinderella:

- Feminist reading- why are the evil step sisters conveyed as ugly? Why is Cinderella conveyed as a damsel in distress?
- Psychological reading- what do parents want from their children?



- Archetypal reading- how does the wicked step-mother compare to other evil step mothers in literature?
- Marxist reading- how are the conflicts between the classes demonstrated throughout the kingdom? Explore the power dynamic of Cinderella's experience at home.

Critical Encounters with *Scarlet Letter*



- Feminist reading- Explore the role of “slut shaming” in the text. How might this effect modern readers? Is Hester a feminist hero?
- Psychological- What are the psychological effects of shame?
- Post-Colonial reading- How are the Native Americans portrayed in the text?
- Marxist- How do the priests abuse their positions of power in the text?
- Biographical- How does Hawthorne’s family history affect his writing?
- Historical- Explore how this text reflects Puritan ideals.

Lord of the Flies

- Formalist reading- how does Golding use setting as a literary device? How does he use allegory?
- Feminist- what effect does Golding's exclusion of women make?
- Marxist- How do the boys break into "class systems." How do they handle the division of labor?
- Psychological- How does Freud's theory of the unconscious (id, ego, superego) relate to the text?
- Historical- How does the historical context of World War II and the Cold War effect the reading of "the beast"
- Biographical- Golding's experiences in war
- Post-Colonial- Examine uses of the word "savage"

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

- Formalist reading- Twain's use of setting, characterization, dialect, irony, symbolism, and other literary devices
- Feminist- How are the women portrayed in the text?
- Historical- context of when the novel was written
- Marxist- power dynamics between a free white man and a slave. Portrayals of slaves vs. poor whites
- Biographical- Twain's life experience
- Archetypal- how does Huck's journey parallel with the hero's journey?

The Great Gatsby

- Feminist- Daisy & Myrtle
- Queer Theory- Photographer & Baker
- Marxist- maids, butler, old and new money, working class, and race
- Historical- 20's prohibition
- Biographical- Fitzgerald as an ex-pat
- Archetypal- light and dark, water imagery, seasons
- Psychological- obsession, the psychology of renaming oneself

Critical Encounters with the movie *Mean Girls*



Formalist

How does the fact that the movie is narrated from Cady's point of view affect how viewers consume the message?



Deconstructionism

Does the film contradict itself?

Does its conclusion convey a holistic understanding of feminism? Is body image ever fully resolved?



Queer Theory

How does the movie handle homosexuality? Is Damian portrayed in a positive or a negative light? How does the lesbian rumor affect Janis' social status?



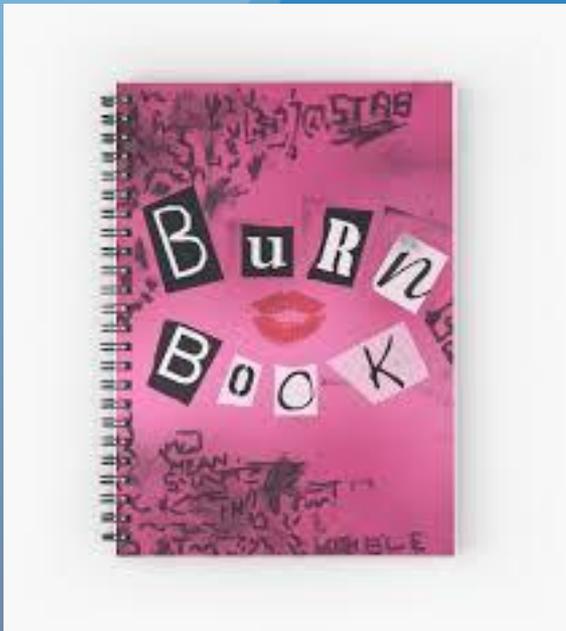
Marxist

How are money and class related to status in the movie?



Psychological:

- Effects of bullying
- Mob mentality



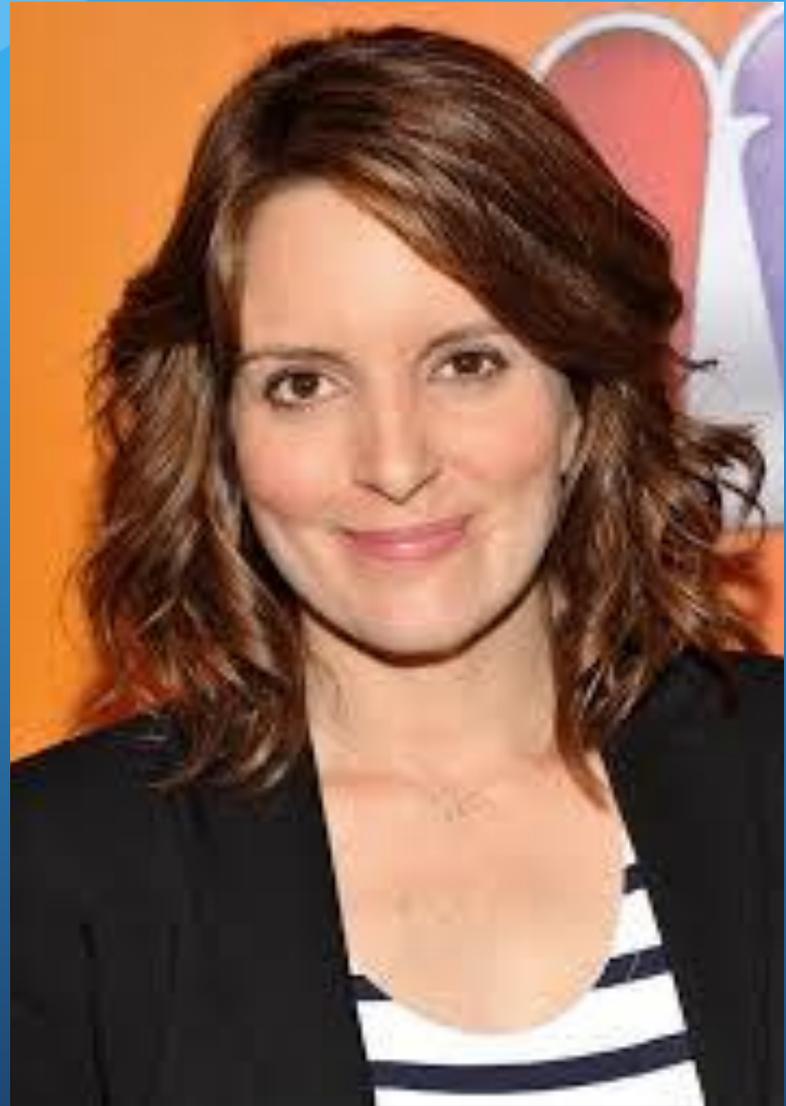
Reader Response

How does this relate to your experiences in High School?



Biographical

How does this movie relate to Tina Fey's High School experience?



Post-Colonial

How does the movie portray Cady's experiences in Africa, African people, and the relationship between white and African people?



As a class- Little Mermaid



- Explain a strategy you would use to apply four critical approaches.

As a class- Star Wars



- Explain a strategy you would use to apply four critical approaches.

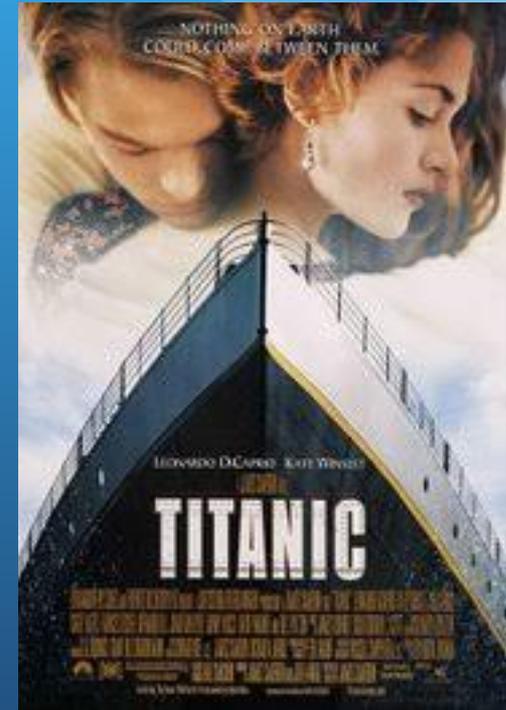
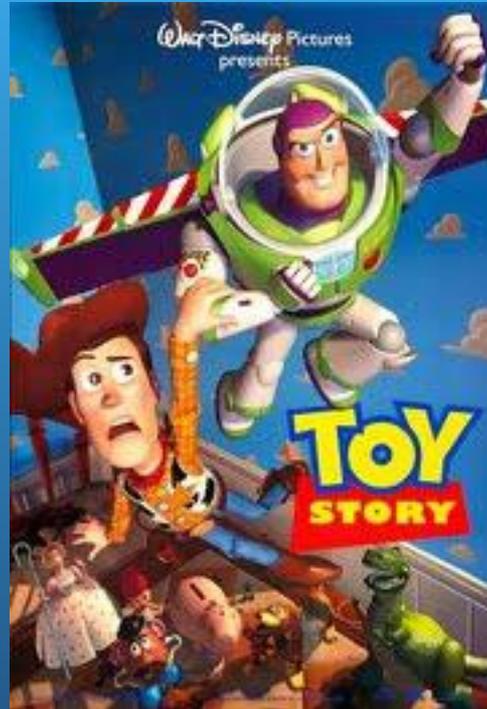
With Groups- The Wizard of Oz



- Explain a strategy you would use to apply four critical approaches.

Individual- Choose one of the following:

- Toy Story
- Jurassic Park
- Titanic



- Explain a strategy you would use to apply four critical approaches.