



 **Prestwick House**

Free Lesson Plan

Introducing Literary Theory – A Unit Wrap-Up



Objectives:

- Introduce the concept of literary theory
- Introduce students to the basic tenets of Feminist, Marxist, Psychological, and Mythological Literary Theory
- Analyze a work read in class using basic questions from a variety of theories

Time:

1 class period

Materials

One copy of each handout

Procedures

1. Introduce the concept of literary theory.

Begin the class by asking, “Is there a single correct interpretation for a book?” In an informal discussion, explore the idea of what a book “means.” Ask specifically about the most recent book that you read together in class and steer the discussion to an understanding that works of literature have multiple levels of meaning and can be interpreted in a variety of different ways.

In discussing the concept of “meaning,” try to introduce one or two potential literary theories as possible meanings for the text. See the following three examples of popular classroom texts as examples.

***The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald**

Is *The Great Gatsby* about the differences between the rich and the poor and what a person needs to do to cross that gap?

Or is it about what a man will do in an attempt to impress the woman he loves and how people are trapped by society into their relationships?

***Lord of the Flies* by William Golding**

Is *Lord of the Flies* about the struggle between those who have the weapons and power and those who are attempting to maintain civilization?

Or is it a retelling of the biblical story of the Fall and humanity’s being cast out of the Garden of Eden?

***Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad**

Is *Heart of Darkness* a story about the horrors caused by the evil excesses of 19th century colonialism?

Or is it a version of the hero's journey in which Marlowe travels on a quest and learns about his own true nature?

Explain that in each of the above examples (or those that you provide), the story can be read in both ways, and each provides a different lens into the story. Those different lenses are called "Critical Theories" and there are dozens, if not hundreds, of potential approaches to reading literature.

2. Break students into groups to examine a work they've recently read in class.

Break your students into 4 groups of equal size and give each group a different handout. Each handout includes an introduction to one theory and 5 questions that guide your students through an examination of a work through that theory.

In small groups, students should discuss each of the following theories and answer the questions in the handout.

3. Bring students together to discuss.

When your students have completed the handouts, ask each group to give a short analysis of the book from their assigned perspective. Ask them to start by describing what their theory is and give a brief description of the theory. Ask what they learned about the book from looking at it from this perspective.

Feminist Literary Theory

Introduction:

Feminist Theory explores how gender is portrayed in literature. Because most literature that has traditionally been studied was written from a male point of view, much of Feminist Theory focuses on examining the power relationships between male and female characters, whether female characters are as well-developed as the male characters, or whether there is deliberate or unintentional sexism throughout the book.

Questions for a Feminist Reading:

1. What stereotypes of women are present? Are female characters oversimplified? Weak? Foolish? Excessively naïve?

Example:

2. Do the female characters have any power? What kind is it—Political? Economic? Social? Psychological?

Example:

3. How do the male characters talk about and with female characters?

Example:

4. Are the female characters as well developed as the male characters? Are they believable?

5. After looking at the text from this perspective, what have you learned about the way women are portrayed in literature and the media?

Marxist / Classist Literary Theory

Introduction:

While the name may bring up thoughts of the Soviet Union, Marxist Theory isn't about wearing red and singing the "Internationale." Marxist Literary Theory is based on examining a piece of literature to see how it reveals class conflict, the differences between economic groups, and the difference between the material and spiritual.

Questions for a Marxist / Classist Literary Reading:

1. Who are the powerful people in the text? Who are the powerless? Which group receives the most attention?
2. Why do the powerful have power? Why are the powerless without power?
3. Do the powerful in the text suppress the powerless? How? Media? Religion? Economics? Literature?

Examples:

4. What does the society value? Are possessions acquired for their usefulness or their social value?
5. After reading this text, do you notice any systems of oppression that you have accepted? If so, what system, and how do you think you came to accept it?

Psychological / Freudian Theory

Introduction:

The Psychological/Freudian approach examines the symbols, characters, and author from the perspective of classical psychology—seeking to understand the hidden meanings and motivations of a work. This method of examining a work often focuses on the deeper significance of dreams and symbols and the psychological issues of the author or the characters; it uses theories such as the three-fold view of the subconscious to better understand a work of literature.

Questions for a Psychological / Freudian Reading:

- 1 . What do you infer about the character from his or her thoughts, actions, and speech?
2. What discrepancies exist between the author's portrayal of the character and how other characters react to him or her?
3. How does the character view him or herself?
4. Are there any inner conflicts within the character? How are these conflicts revealed? How are they dealt with? Are they resolved? How?
5. Do any of the characters perform uncharacteristic actions? If so, what? What could these actions mean?

Mythological/ Archetypal Theory

Introduction:

The Mythological /Archetypal approach is based on the idea that every story is a retelling or reflection on one of the great stories from the “collective unconscious,” or the combined knowledge of humankind, such as *The Bible* and the ancient Greek and Roman myths. This approach looks at characters from books as versions of heroes like Odysseus (called archetypes) and the plots as versions of stories like The Fall of Adam and Eve.

Questions for a Mythological/ Archetypal Reading:

1. Which characters are the heroes of the story? Do they remind you of heroes from *The Bible* or mythology?
2. What is suggested by the setting (time of day, season of the year, location—garden, body of water, etc.), that might suggest an archetypal reading?
3. What types of symbols are used? What do they represent?
4. How are the symbols in this work different from the traditional use of those symbols?
5. What myths are at work in different parts of this work? What features of the story are reminiscent of other stories you know?

Homework:

For homework, ask students to write a paragraph about a book, story, or play that they've read earlier in the year from the perspective of one of the theories that they studied in class today.

Standards:

Common Core State Standards

Reading Literature

Key Ideas and Details: 9-10.1-3

Craft and Structure 9-10.6

Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills

§110.31 (b) (2)

Sources:

Grudzina, Douglas (ed). *Multiple Critical Perspectives* (Series). Clayton, DE. Publisher: Prestwick House, Inc.

Cuddon, J.A. (ed). *Dictionary of Literary Terms & Literary Theory*. London, England. Publisher: Penguin, 1998.