

The background features a series of overlapping, semi-transparent green triangles of various shades, creating a layered, mountain-like effect. A wide, horizontal band of bright orange with a fine, woven texture separates the green sections. The text is positioned within this orange band.

Literary Criticism

Serious Tools for Serious Readers

Literary Criticism

- Make a careful examination of a text.
- Use a particular perspective to analyze a text from a particular point of view, to answer a focused question or to solve a particular problem.
- Use a theory developed by another critic.



click the link for a cool video

[Mr. Nance Literary Theory](#)

Literary Theories: A Small Sample

- There are many theories about how and why writers write and what the writing means.
- Each theory uses a particular point of view to explain / explore a feature of literature.
- Readers can use these theories to reach their own understanding about a particular text or literature in general.

Reader Response

- WHAT reaction does the text provoke in YOU?
- WHY does the text provoke this reaction in YOU
- HOW does the cause your reaction? What life experience, understanding or emotions do you bring to the reading experience?
- Can be used in conjunction with other theories (i.e. Feminism, Race, Post-Colonial etc.)
- Readers are ACTIVE, not passive and the reader's experience with a text is essential to determining the meaning of that text.
- The MEANING of a text is UNIQUE to each reader.

Reader Response

- How does the text provoke a specific reaction (emotional or intellectual) in the reader?
- How does the interaction of text and reader create meaning?
- What does a close reading tell us about the intended reading experience built into that text by the author?
- Why is the reader's reaction important to understand the overall meaning of the text?



[Mr. Nance: Reader Response](#)

Moral Criticism

- Consider the role of art in society?
- Plato (The Republic) says limit fiction (poetry and drama) – especially if it shows people behaving badly since this corrupts and damages society.
- Aristotle (Poetics) says fiction (poetry and drama) is a “productive science” and is a means to an end: entertainment that helps people deal with negative emotions. Aristotle developed a “How To” manual for what constitutes “good” poems and plays.

Moral Criticism

- What morals, lessons, values or themes does the text address?
- Does the text support or subvert the traditional values of a culture? Does it do this intentionally or unintentionally?
- Will the text make the reader a better member of a society?

Psychoanalytic Criticism: Sigmund Freud

- Our choices and our actions are often not free and are sometimes motivated by UNCONSCIOUS drives, fears or desires of which we are totally unaware.
- Childhood experiences (especially traumas) impact our emotional / mental development as we mature. Often we forget or are unaware of these early experiences.
- Our MIND (NOT BRAIN!) has three forces at work:
- ID: Our basic animal nature.
- SUPEREGO: The values and morality we learn from our culture / society
- EGO: The part of ourselves we think of as ourselves that makes “choices” based on the influence of id and superego.

Psychoanalytic Criticism: Sigmund Freud

- Oedipus Complex: Very young boys (age 1 - 2) UNCONSCIOUSLY want to eliminate Dad to have Mom all to themselves. Very young girls want to dispose of Mom to get to be alone with Dad.
- Boys fear castration as punishment for this desire.
- Girls become attracted to their fathers.
- Eventually, in healthy development, boys and girls outgrow the Oedipus / Electra Complex by identifying with the same-sex parent and hope to get a lover of their own someday.

Psychoanalytic Criticism: Sigmund Freud

- Repression: These desires / fears are UNCONSCIOUS and most people are UNAWARE of these forces at work within them.
- Characters in fiction (or people in life) might say or do things to prevent the repressed traumas or unconscious forces from surfacing. Ex. Holden Caulfield's "madman" activities because he's upset that his brother Allie died.

Psychoanalytic Criticism: Sigmund Freud

- What does the text suggest about the psychological condition of the author?
- Do particular interpretations of a text reveal the psychological condition of the reader?
- Do words or images in a text have any hidden (repressed) meanings?
- Does the text reflect a tension between id, ego and superego?
- Does the text reflect any repressed ideas of the characters? The author? The culture in which the text was written?
- Are any Oedipal dynamics at work within the story or in the author's life?

Psychoanalytic Criticism: Carl Jung

- Human beings have a “collective unconscious” a set of understandings, images, even memories shared by the entire human race for all time.
- All stories and images connect to our common, human heritage and similarities can be found in stories, dreams and myths from around the world throughout human history.
- When we experience a story, we unconsciously recognize certain images called Archetypes that have always been part of human experience.

Psychoanalytic Criticism: Carl Jung

Some Character Archetypes:

- Shadow
- Mother (Ex: Fairy Godmother, Positive Female Power)
- Father (King, Positive Male Power)
- Wise Mentor
- Maiden (Princess to be rescued)
- Death
- Giant (Boss, Powerful Figure– often negative)

Psychoanalytic Criticism: Carl Jung

Some Some Plot Archetypes

- A quest (Find something)
- A rescue (Free someone from bondage)
- A Riddle (Solve a mystery)

Some Setting Archetypes

- A wilderness
- Tomb / Graveyard
- The Underworld
- The Sea

Psychoanalytic Criticism: Carl Jung

- Connections between characters, plot elements, images and archetypes
- How do the characters in the text mirror the archetypal figures? (Great Mother or nurturing Mother, Whore, destroying Crone, Lover, Destroying Angel)
- How does the text mirror the archetypal narrative patterns? (Quest, Night-Sea-Journey)

Psychoanalytic Criticism: Carl Jung

- How symbolic is the imagery in the work?
- How is the protagonist like a mythological hero?
- Does the “hero” embark on a journey in either a physical or spiritual sense?
- Is there a journey to an underworld or land of the dead?
- What trials or ordeals does the protagonist face? What is the reward for overcoming them?

[Mr. Nance: Psychological Criticism](#)



click the link for a cool video

New Historicism /Culture Theory

- Examine the relationship between a text, its author, and the historical / cultural circumstances during which the text was written.
- Examine ways that a text is a product and a reflection of the time in which it was written.
- Examine ways a text supports or rejects dominant ideas of the culture in which it was written
- Examine ways in which our own culture impacts our understanding of a text written in a different time / place by creating bias.

New Historicism /Culture Theory

- What language/characters/events present in the work reflect the current events of the author's day?
- Are there words in the text that have changed their meaning from the time of the writing?
- What ideas are in the text that were circulating in the culture where the text was written?
- Are these ideas traditional or subversive within that culture?

[Mr. Nance: Historicism](#)



click the link for a cool video

Marxist / Economic Theory

- Economic forces drive people's actions and motivate their choices since wealth = power.
- There are always upper and lower classes and they always conflict.
- Conflict is reflected in art (literature, music, drama, etc.)
- Societies go through stages of resistance to status quo (contradiction / counter-culture), leading to revolution that establishes a new status quo. Then the cycle repeats.

Marxist / Economic Theory

- Who benefits?
- Who is oppressed?
- What social classes are portrayed in the text? How are they portrayed?
- What conflicts arise because of social / economic factors?
- What is the social class / economic standing of the author?
- What values does the text support / subvert?

Post Colonial Criticism

- Examine the literature produced during and after powerful European nations / the USA appropriated other lands and other cultures in Africa, Asia, the Americas.
- The impact on literature of political, industrial, military, economic, religious power on the colonizing nation, the experience of the colonists, and the experience of the native people at the site of colonization
- Portrayal of colonizers and natives in literature
- Critique of literary canon (what books are taught in HS / college) as reflections of colonial power

Post Colonial Criticism

- How does the literary text, explicitly or allegorically, represent various aspects of colonial oppression?
- What does the text reveal about the problems of post-colonial identity, including the relationship between personal and cultural identity?
- What person(s) or groups does the work identify as "other" or stranger? How are such persons/groups described and treated?
- What does the text reveal about the operations of cultural difference - the ways in which race, religion, class, gender, sexual orientation, cultural beliefs, and customs combine to form individual identity - in shaping our perceptions of ourselves, others, and the world in which we live?

Critical Race Theory

- Examines race identity, race relations, racism within a culture as reflected in a text.
- Representations of race in a text
- Examine the explicit and implicit effects of conscious and unconscious ideas about race within a culture on an author, a text or a reader

Critical Race Theory

- Challenge these practices in order to seek liberation from systemic racism.
- Critique the traditional literary canon (What books are taught in HS / College) to determine effects and reflections of race and racism

Critical Race Theory

- What is the significance of race in a culture?
- What types of texts and other cultural artifacts reflect dominant culture's perceptions of race?
- How do ideas about race affect all members of society and how does a text reflect these ideas?
- How does racism continue as a persistent force in American society? How does a text support or resist racism?
- To what extent does a text accurately reflect the experiences of race and/or racism?

Feminist Criticism

- Consider the ways in which a text reinforces or resists the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women
- Examine the ways a text reflects or resists a patriarchal (male dominated) culture and the effects of patriarchy on that culture

Feminist Criticism

- Examine conscious / unconscious and explicit / implicit misogyny (negative ideas about women) in writing about women and the portrayal of women in a text
- Consider marginalization or exclusion of women writers from the traditional literary canon (texts taught in HS or College)

[Mr. Nance: Feminism](#)



click the link for a cool video

Gender Theory

- How are gender, gender identity, gender roles, sexuality or sexual orientation portrayed in the text?
- Who is empowered and who is marginalized because of gender, gender identity or sexual orientation?
- Does the text support or subvert the concept of a heterosexual patriarchy?
- Is there a clear, binary distinction between male-female character / gender roles?
- How are notions of “masculine” and “feminine” presented?

Gender / Queer Theory

- What elements of the text can be perceived as being masculine (active, powerful) and feminine (passive, marginalized) and how do the characters support these traditional roles?
- What sort of support (if any) is given to elements or characters who question the masculine/feminine binary? What happens to those elements/characters?

Gender / Queer Theory

- How does the literary text illustrate the problems of sexuality and sexual "identity"
- The ways in which human sexuality, gender and gender identity does or does not fall neatly into the separate categories defined by the words male / female, masculine / feminine, homosexual / heterosexual
- Consider ways in which gender identity / sexual orientation are reflected in the traditional literary canon (texts taught in HS or College)

Deconstruction

- Examines a text to find ways and places where systems, frameworks, definitions, and certainties break down.
- Allows for multiple truths, unstable structures and fuzzy frameworks. Knowledge and meaning are decentered.
- Examine how meaning often implies hierarchy of power and these hierarchies are made up because of language. Ex. The lightning flashes IMPLIES that the lightning is something different from the flashing. This is a false concept resulting from ambiguity built into the structure of language.

Deconstruction

- Language is not a reliable means of getting the truth.
- Language is always vague or ambiguous.
- Questions the way in which we develop meaning.
- Questions ideas like: Science will always lead to improvements
- Knowledge based on language is always in “freeplay.”

Deconstruction

- Language is inadequate to accurately represent reality.
- Looks for flaws / ambiguities in language to figure out ways to close the gap.
- Author is not the AUTHORITY in interpreting the meaning of a text.
- Narratives are artificial way of locking a reader into a single way of interpreting a text.
- Narratives do not reflect our actual experiences of the world

Deconstruction

Some examples of ambiguities in language:

- Time (noun) flies (verb) like an arrow (adverb clause) = Time passes quickly.
- Time (verb) flies (object) like an arrow (adverb clause) = Get out your stopwatch and time the speed of flies as you would time an arrow's flight.
- Time flies (noun) like (verb) an arrow (object) = Time flies are fond of arrows (or at least of one particular arrow).

Deconstruction

Some examples of ambiguities in language:

- The shooting of the hunters was terrible. (A hunter had bad aim OR a hunter was tragically shot)
- The construction truck tore up the highway. (A truck drove really fast up the highway OR a truck demolished a highway for a construction job)
- I got fired from the calendar factory after I took a day off. (I got fired because I failed to show up OR because I made an error in making a calendar)

Deconstruction

- How is language thrown into freeplay or questioned in the text?
- How does the text undermine or contradict generally accepted truths?
- How does the text support or reject ideas about genre?

Deconstruction

- How does the author (or a character) omit, change, or reconstruct memory or identity?
- What ideas does the text seem to promote?
- If we changed the point of view of the text – say from one character to another, or multiple characters – how would the story change? Whose story is not told in the text? Who is left out and why might the author have omitted this character's tale?

Mr. Nance: Deconstruction