

## Literary Theory

The phrase “literary theory” refers to a way of viewing a work of literature in order to more fully understand what it says and how it is saying it. There are dozens of different theories, many of which overlap in their scope and/or are offshoots of other literary theories. Literary critics tend to find a theory or related set of theories that make particular sense to them, and then apply their preferred approach to most texts that they encounter.

3-D glasses analogy: Applying a particular theory to a text should not force meaning onto the text. Rather, I like to think of a literary theory as a specialized type of 3-D glasses. Reading a text with a particular set of 3-D glasses (e.g., feminist “glasses”) encourages certain features of the text to stand out that may have gone unnoticed without the glasses. In other words, a 3-D picture doesn’t change because you put the glasses on, but the glasses allow you to see the depth that is otherwise unseen.

As a basic introduction to applying literary theory, we are going to look at four theoretical models; it is the proverbial tip of the lit theory iceberg.

**feminist theory** – focus on sexual differences and sexual politics.

- How do females experience the world that is uniquely feminine?
- How does society treat females because of their gender?
- How do females negotiate their worlds in light of gender-specific treatment?

**Marxist theory** – focus on the historical forces that affect individuals in society via material (e.g., monetary) value. Named for economic and political theorist Karl Marx (1818-1883).

- How do economics (having or not having wealth) affect an individual?
- How does a society’s tendency to enable ways of producing wealth shape that society and affect individuals?
- How are individuals affected within class-based societies as they try to stay fixed in a class or move from class to class?

**queer theory** – primary focus has been on the experiences of individuals with gay/lesbian orientations, but has expanded to include the experiences of anyone identified with a “fringe” group in society, including women, people of color, and those with disabilities, among many others.

- How does the “queer” Other experience the world that is unique?
- How does society treat the queer Other because of his/her “queerness”?
- How do queer Others negotiate their worlds in light of this specific treatment?

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**postmodern theory** – (the most difficult to define because it isn't so much a theory as a movement) focus on component parts of texts in order to demonstrate that form and orderliness are artificial, and, moreover, absolute truth does not exist. Associated mainly with works produced in the latter half of the twentieth century.

- How does a reader experience a text, and how does that experience influence the text's "meaning"?
- By breaking with readers's expectations for a text, what does that text reveal about the world, or about producing a text, or about experiencing a text?
- What does the subjectivity of interpreting a text say about interpreting the world revealed through the text?