San José State University Writing Center
www.sjsu.edu/writingcenter
Written by Michael Muszynski

Literary Lenses for Analysis and Discussion

Whenever we read a story, poem, or play, we almost always tend to focus on what *happens*—the plot, the characters, or the ending. But what if we could dive a little deeper? What if we could question the *how* and *why* of a text to find hidden messages within it? Literary lenses can help us do just that. A literary lens is like a pair of glasses that changes how we can see a text—for example, a feminist lens might highlight how gender shapes a character's experience, while a Marxist lens might focus on how a story's setting comments on class or power.

Why Use Literary Lenses?

Engaging with this kind of analysis allows readers to uncover new layers of meaning which may otherwise go unnoticed. We learn more about critical thinking, empathy, and awareness of other perspectives, placing ourselves in their shoes, and allowing each of us to have different interpretations of the same story. While this handout does not cover every way in which a text can be interpreted—and with the nature of being a brief handout, does not dive as deeply into theory as existing texts that further explain these perspectives—this resource can still open the door for you to see both literature and the world with new eyes.

This handout will give a brief overview of three foundational literary lenses (or theories), their key ideas, strategies for textual analysis, and development of related discussion questions.

First Theory: What is New Criticism?

New Criticism is a literary theory that emphasizes close reading and argues that a literary work should be analyzed as a self-contained, independent object. By *studying the text alone*, New Criticism encourages readers to pay more careful attention to language and craft, *rather* than the author's biography, the story's historical context, or the reader's feelings about the work.

Key Ideas: New Criticism

New Criticism focuses solely on the core elements of the text, such as structure, style, symbols, and language, rather than external factors.

Analysis: New Criticism

The goal of using New Criticism is to focus on the text itself and only the text—centering on how the text's parts can create overall meaning and effect rather than our personal biases. One of the best approaches is to do a *close reading* of a passage, reading carefully and repeatedly, paying attention to specific word choices, patterns, and structure.

Example: A common reading of *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald is that it's an urgent warning against American decadence and rampant capitalism during the 1920s. A New Critic would try to analyze the text itself to see how it shows this beyond a student seeing the novel's historical context being published at the height of the 1920s. They might analyze the novel's length, pacing, and overall rhythmic pace of the writing itself to see how it communicates that urgency and warns against American exceptionalism's impending doom.

Discussion: New Criticism

To think like a New Critic, your discussion questions should direct attention to form, language, and structure, not biography or social issues. Good questions for New Criticism encourage readers to notice how meaning is built within the text itself.

- How does Fitzgerald's repeated use of color imagery (gold, white, green, gray) contribute to *The Great Gatsby*'s overall sense of grandeur and decay?
- How does Shakespeare's use of sonnet form in *Romeo and Juliet*'s first meeting shape our understanding of their relationship?
- How does Lee's choice to frame the story as a recollection—Scout narrating her own childhood—shape *To Kill A Mockingbird*'s internal contradictions; what overall meaning is built through this usage of form?

Further Reading: New Criticism

You can read more about this theory in two books by its founder, I.A. Richards: *Principles of Literary Criticism* and *Practical Criticism.* John Crowe Ransom's book *The New Criticism* is also valuable additional reading.

Second Theory: What is Reader-Response Theory?

Reader-Response Theory focuses on the idea that a text's meaning does not exist within the words alone, directly countering New Criticism—meaning is created through the interaction between each reader and the text. To Reader-Response critics, there is no inherent, pre-existing meaning in a story; meaning only happens through *the act of reading*. This theory shifts away from harkening back to the author's intentions to instead emphasize any reader's personal experience, emotional response, or different interpretations (College of New Caledonia).

Key Ideas: Reader-Response Theory

For Reader-Response Theory, consider how the reader's *(your)* individual background, experiences, and personal connections shape your overall interpretation of the text.

Analysis: Reader-Response Theory

The goal of a Reader-Response lens is to forgo the idea that the text has one 'correct' interpretation; instead, readers must build their own meaning by connecting the text to their own feelings, memories, or beliefs. One way to do this would be to read actively, annotating the text with your personal reactions and reflections. Identify moments where you are confused, excited,

angry, curious, or surprised, and then ask why you responded that way: what in your background, identity, or experiences influenced your interpretation of the text?

Example: A common reading of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is that the story and the actions of the characters seem more frustrating than romantic, seeing violence and misunderstandings all leading toward the tragic ending. Using a Reader-Response literary lens, a reader could relate the story to their own experiences in teenage relationships, realizing that oftentimes they can be more tragic than romantic, and passion can blind reason.

Discussion: Reader-Response Theory

To think like a Reader-Response theorist, ask questions that explore your personal interpretations, relating your own feelings and experiences to the text.

- Which moments in *The Great Gatsby* invited you to identify with Gatsby or with Nick as characters, or which moments distanced you from them?
- How does your understanding of love influence your interpretation of *Romeo and Juliet*? If you reread this text at a future point in your life, or remember/imagine yourself reading it at a previous point, how do you think that interpretation might change?
- Where in *To Kill A Mockingbird* did you find yourself making assumptions (where you fill in the gaps or made judgments) about Atticus Finch's motives or morality? What previous experiences or memories drew you to those notions and conclusions?

Further Reading: Reader-Response Theory

You can read more about this theory through works like Stanley Fish's essay "Is There a Text in This Class?" and Lois Tyson's book *Critical Theory Today*.

Third Theory: What is New Historicism?

New Historicism emphasizes the *interconnectedness of literature and its historical context*. Using questions and analysis focused on New Historicism, readers can explore the social, cultural, or political conditions in which a work was written or that might have influenced the author. "Because it is impossible to escape one's own *'historicity*,' the meaning of a text is fluid, not fixed" (Poetry Foundation, 2025). Ultimately, a New Historicist knows that readers and literary works themselves are byproducts of moments in history with their own unique attitudes, concepts, flaws, and ideologies.

Key Ideas: New Historicism

A New Historicist would say that it is impossible to have an objective view of history, so people cannot help but see it through the lens of their own biases, interpretations, and experiences. Therefore, literary works cannot be interpreted without considering their historical context. Incorporating world history, art history, and anthropology into literary study allows us to consider an art piece's context and surrounding environment for further discussion.

Analysis: New Historicism

The goal of New Historicism is to not separate literary works from their historical context. By utilizing New Historicism, readers can consider how writers across time either knowingly or unknowingly reflect the values, struggles, conflicts, and nature of the culture from which they came (Greene 2024).

Example: A common reading of Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird* is that the novel acts as a sort of window into the Jim Crow American South. However, despite emerging during the Civil Rights Movement, the novel only offers minimal representation of Black perspectives. Using a New Historicist lens, a reader might analyze the novel's light gestures toward systemic violence, centering itself on the moral awakening of white protagonists, or its alignment with mid-20th-century liberal white ally narratives that sought to critique racism without challenging white narrative authority.

Discussion: New Historicism

To think like a New Historicist, ask questions that allow you to engage with the surrounding context of a story—historical, cultural, societal—and make connections.

- How does *The Great Gatsby* romanticize or criticize aspects of America's Jazz Age, and what does it suggest about this era's anxieties?
- How does the violence portrayed in *Romeo and Juliet* between the Montagues and Capulets possibly reflect civil unrest and anxieties during Elizabethan England?
- How do you think Scout's innocence as a child narrator influences *To Kill A Mockingbird*'s portrayal of a historical era?

Further Reading: New Historicism

You can read more about this theory through the works of its founder, Stephen Greenblatt, a professor and historian. Consider reading Greenblatt's *Learning to Curse* and Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt's *Practicing New Historicism.*

Activity: Using Literary Lenses to Analyze the Same Text

By utilizing literary lenses, readers not only think more critically about a text, but also find different ways to interpret the same text. For this activity, you will be doing exactly that. After reading the following passages from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, craft three discussion questions for each passage. One of your discussion questions should be from a New Critic's perspective, the second through a Reader-Response theorist's perspective, and the third should be a New Historicist's.

Passage #1: Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë

It might be two hours later, probably near eleven, when I—not having been able to fall asleep, and deeming, from the perfect silence of the dormitory, that my companions were all wrapt in profound repose—rose softly, put on my frock over my night-dress, and, without shoes, crept

from the apartment, and set off in quest of Miss Temple's room. It was quite at the other end of the house; but I knew my way; and the light of the unclouded summer moon, entering here and there at passage windows, enabled me to find it without difficulty. An odour of camphor and burnt vinegar warned me when I came near the fever room: and I passed its door quickly, fearful lest the nurse who sat up all night should hear me. I dreaded being discovered and sent back; for I must see Helen,—I must embrace her before she died,—I must give her one last kiss, exchange with her one last word.

Passage #2: Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe

He was tall but very thin and had a slight stoop. He wore a haggard and mournful look except when he was drinking or playing on his flute. He was very good on his flute, and his happiest moments were the two or three moons after the harvest when the village musicians brought down their instruments, hung above the fireplace. Unoka would play with them, his face beaming with blessedness and peace. Sometimes another village would ask Unoka's band and their dancing egwugwu to come and stay with them and teach them their tunes… Old men and children would then sit round log fires, warming their bodies. Unoka loved it all, and he loved the first kites that returned with the dry season, and the children who sang songs of welcome to them. He would remember his own childhood, how he had often wandered around looking for a kite sailing leisurely against the blue sky. As soon as he found one he would sing with his whole being, welcoming it back from its long, long journey, and asking it if it had brought home any lengths of cloth.

Answer Key: Sample Questions

These questions are not answers per se, but they can be examples of what your discussion questions could look like.

Jane Eyre discussion questions:

- How does the repetition of the phrase 'I must' emphasize Jane's emotional urgency and inner conflict? [New Criticism]
- While reading this passage, how do you respond to the sensory details in the scene? Do they make the scene more vivid, haunting, or suspenseful for you? Why? [Reader-Response Theory]
- How might Charlotte Brontë's real experience with harsh conditions and a typhus outbreak at her boarding school influence the depiction of Jane Eye's experience in this passage? [New Historicism]

Things Fall Apart discussion questions:

- What elements of the passage's language and structure help build a vivid sense of the world Unoka inhabits? [New Criticism]

- Do you find Unoka sympathetic, irresponsible, carefree, or something else? Which parts of the passage guide you toward that interpretation? [Reader-Response Theory]
- How does the passage's idealization of seasonal cycles and communal harmony contrast with historical European accounts of Africa? [New Historicism]

References

Achebe, C. (2009). *Things fall apart*. Anchor Canada.

Brontë, C. (1938). *Jane Eyre*. Oxford University Press.

College of New Caledonia. (2024). *Seeing stories differently: An introduction to literary lenses*. https://libguides.cnc.bc.ca/c.php?g=738618&p=5326103#:~:text=Examines%20how%20readers%20receive%2C%20interpret,and%20understanding%20of%20the%20work

Greene, J. (2024). *Research starters: New historicism*. EBSCO. https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/social-sciences-and-humanities/new-historicism

Fitzgerald, F. S. (2022). *The great Gatsby*. Union Square & Co.

Lee, H. (2006). *To kill a mockingbird*. Harper Perennial Modern Classics.

Pellissippi State Community College. (2025). *Critical literary lenses*. https://lib.pstcc.edu/c.php?g=106685&p=7483931

Poetry Foundation. (2025). *New criticism.* https://www.poetryfoundation.org/education/glossary/new-criticism

Poetry Foundation. (2025). *New historicism*. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/education/glossary/new-historicism

Poetry Foundation. (2025). *Reader-response theory*. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/education/glossary/reader-response-theory

Shakespeare, W. (2002). *Romeo and Juliet.* Cambridge University Press.

Taft College. (2025, February 18). *Types of literary theory.* https://lib.taftcollege.edu/literary-criticism/literary-theories