

SOCIAL CLASS LENS

Understanding structures of power based on social and economic class



A Marxist critic grounds his theory and practice on the economic and cultural theory of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, especially on the following claims:

- The evolving *history of humanity*, its *institutions*, and its ways of thinking are determined by the changing mode of its *“material production”*—that is, of its basic economic organization.
- Historical changes in the fundamental mode of *production* effect essential changes both in the constitution and *power relations* of social classes, which carry on a conflict for economic, political, and social advantage.
- Human consciousness in any era is constituted by an *ideology*—that is a set of concepts, beliefs, values, and ways of thinking and feeling through which human beings perceive, and by which they explain what they take to be reality.
- A Marxist critic typically undertakes to “explain” the literature in any era by revealing the *economic, class, and ideological determinants* of the way an author writes, and to examine the relation of the text to the *social reality* of that time and place.

This school of critical theory focuses on power and money in works of literature. Who has the power/money? Who does not? What happens as a result? For example, it could be said that “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” is about the upper class attempting to maintain their power and influence over the lower class by chasing Ichabod, a lower-class citizen with aspirations toward the upper class, out of town. This would explain some of the numerous descriptions you get of land, wealth, and hearty living through Ichabod’s eyes.

Appleman, Deborah. *Critical Encounters in Secondary English: Teaching Literary Theory to Adolescents*, Third Edition (Language & Literacy Series)(p. 162). Teachers College Press. Kindle Edition.

KEY QUESTIONS

CONTEXTUALIZE

- What’s the social class of the author?
- What were the primary ideological/political struggles that occurred in their lifetime?
- Which class does the work claim to represent?
- Which values does it reinforce? What values does it subvert?
- What conflict can be seen between the values the work champions and those it portrays?

CLOSE READING/VIEWING

- What social classes are characters part of?
- How might their dialect, appearance, behavior, etc. clue you in to a character’s social class?
- What are examples of class conflict in the plot?
- How does the setting(s) reflect the living conditions of different characters?
- Who has power in the text? Who does not? What role does social class play in that dynamic?

CONNECTIONS

- What similarities/differences are there in the way class conflict plays out in the book and how it plays out in current events?
- What experiences do you have with social class and how might it impact your analysis?
- What are texts from popular culture that explore social class and how can they help you understand your current text?

KEY CONCEPTS



POWER



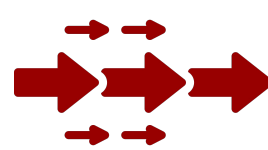
IDEOLOGY



CLASS



PRODUCTION



HEGEMONY



BOURGEOISE



PROLETARIAT

MENTOR TEXTS



PRIMARY SOURCES



GENDER / FEMINIST LENS

Understanding how social relations are influenced by the construction of gender



A feminist critic sees cultural and economic disabilities in a patriarchal society that have hindered or prevented women from realizing their creative possibilities and women’s cultural identification is as a merely negative object, or “Other” to man as the defining and dominating “Subject.” There are several assumptions and concepts held in common by most feminist critics.

- Our civilization is pervasively patriarchal.
- The concepts of gender are largely, if not entirely, cultural constructs, effected by the omnipresent patriarchal biases of our civilization.
- This patriarchal ideology also pervades those writings which have been considered great literature. Such works lack autonomous female role models, are implicitly addressed to male readers, and leave the woman reader an alien outsider or else solicit her to identify against herself by assuming male values and ways of perceiving. Feeling and acting.

This is somewhat like Marxist criticism, but instead of focusing on the relationships between the classes it focuses on the relationships between the genders. Under this theory you would examine the patterns of thought, behavior, values, enfranchisement, and power in relations between the sexes. For example, “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been” can be seen as the story of the malicious dominance men have over women both physically and psychologically. Connie is the female victim of the role in society that she perceives herself playing—the coy young lass whose life depends upon her looks.

KEY QUESTIONS

CONTEXTUALIZE

- What is the gender of the author?
- When was the text written and what were the typical gender dynamics of that period?
- What were some of the gender dynamics of the culture/region/country that might have shaped the author’s perspective?

CLOSE READING/VIEWING

- What’s the gender of the protagonist and supporting characters? The antagonist(s)?
- Does the text reinforce or undermine gender stereotypes?
- How does gender contribute to the text’s conflict(s)?

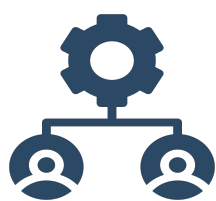
CONNECTIONS

- How do the gender dynamics in the text reflect those present in other texts you’ve seen/read?
- How does the text reinforce/subvert gender dynamics from other texts in that time period?
- How might your own gender identity shape your interpretation?

KEY CONCEPTS



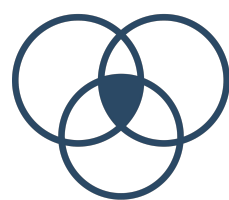
GENDER



ROLES



PATRIARCHY



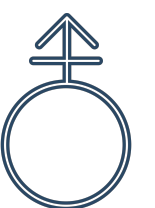
INTERSECTIONALITY



MASCULINITY



FEMININITY



ANDROGYNY

MENTOR TEXTS



PRIMARY SOURCES



PSYCHO-ANALYTIC LENS

Understanding human needs, desires, hangups, and hardwiring



The question of what makes us who we are, and how our individual selfhood is constructed, is the main concern of the school of thought we call psychoanalytic theory. Unlike the other approaches discussed in this book, psychoanalysis is also a very real-world, practical field of study designed to treat mental health difficulties. The most dominant school of psychoanalysis is that developed by the Austrian Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) in the early twentieth century. Freud believed that forces in our unconscious drive us to behave in certain ways: we are unaware of these thoughts but they direct how we feel and act.

The individual represses many things, which remain within the unconscious: desires, traumas and tensions that we do not acknowledge in everyday life because we have mentally pushed them into a place where we are not aware of them. For Freud, it is these unconscious feelings that determine our behaviour, and understanding these impulses is central to our mental wellbeing. Whereas Freud focused on the individual, Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung focused on how different groups, cultures, and communities might share particular psychologies, or what he calls a “collective unconscious”.

More recently, psychoanalytical critics, like Jacques Lacan, have come to see literary works as skillfully crafted artifacts that may appeal to our neuroses by tapping into our repressed wishes and fantasies. More generally, this theory is a style of criticism that seeks to understand a character’s latent or apparent motivations, confusion, desires, and needs through symbolic use of imagery and objects.

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KEY QUESTIONS

CONTEXTUALIZE

- What are key biographical moments in the author’s life and why might they be influential?
- What are common sources of anxiety during the time of their lives?
- What underlying psychological subtext might be present in the work based on those moments?
- Are there patterns (anxiety, repression, fear of death, trauma, etc.) that can be applied to the author’s life in ways that may impact the text?

CLOSE READING/VIEWING

- What are key moments in the character’s lives and how might they shape their future actions?
- How do character’s needs and desires shape their behavior and actions?
- How might those patterns reflect/resemble the broader unconscious of a community?
- Is there an image/object that might reflect character(s) desire(s)?

CONNECTIONS

- What are forms of neurosis you’ve noticed in other texts?
- What are examples of desire driving behavior you can think of and why?
- What are objects or symbols you’ve noticed that relate to a character’s psyche in texts you watch/read?

KEY CONCEPTS



ID/EGO/SUPEREGO



DRIVES



TRAUMA



Un/Pre/Conscious



NEUROSIS



REPRESSION



PROJECTION

MENTOR TEXTS



PRIMARY SOURCES

