

Critical Theory: A Vehicle for Social Justice

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Agenda	Content	Time
I. Introductions	Ideology and You Ideology (n): a system of social, cultural, and personal values and beliefs that shapes how one sees the world Ideology, Us, and the Rhetorical Triangle	15 min
II. Literary Theory	What is Literary Theory? Introduction to Literary Theory Approaches to Literature Schools of Critical Theory	15 minutes
III. Application	Applying Literary Theory to <i>A Raisin in the Sun</i> Critical Race Theory** <i>focus area</i> Social Class/Marxist Theory Gender/Feminist Theory	15 minutes
IV. Reflection Debrief/Q&A	Literary Theory: Applications in Our Classrooms Reflections on our Practice Literary Theory as Social Justice Primer Questions? Suggested Resources & Contact Information	15 min

What is Literary Theory? Developing an Understanding

Critical Race Theory	Gender Theory	Social Class Theory
Main Ideas:	Main Ideas:	Main Ideas:
Questions:	Questions:	Questions:

Critical Race Theory (1980s-present)

Critical race theory is concerned with the ways in which literature (as one element of culture & society) reinforces or undermines structural, social, interpersonal, and psychological **racial dynamics & power structures**, both between and within groups of people.

Common Elements to Consider of Critical Race Theory

- Racism is an **unavoidable** part of American history and contemporary society.
- The dominant culture in a society often has more **power** than minority cultures within certain **institutions** in the dominant culture (government, politics, the law, religion, education, et.c).
- White privilege and white supremacy **oppress people of color in multiple ways** – economically, politically, socially, and psychologically. White privilege and supremacy are also adopted by people of the dominant group, **even if they do not think or feel blatant racism, prejudices, or discrimination** toward people of color or act in blatantly racist ways (ie., microaggressions). White people also **benefit from their privilege** even if they do not behave in ways that support racist structures and systems.
- **Internalized racism** is the psychological internalization of racist attitudes towards members of one's own ethnic group, including themselves. This includes ideas within African American communities like valuing lighter skin or “good” hair (ie. being color-struck).

Questions to Ask in a Critical Race Theory Reading of a Text

1. Where, in what ways, and to what ends does **race appear and shape** the ways in which characters interact with one another?
2. How do the language, values, or actions of the characters **reflect, challenge, or reinforce perceptions of race**?
3. How does the text reflect the **varied experiences** of people of color?
4. What are the **power relationships** between characters?
5. What does the work reveal about the **operations (economically, politically, socially, or psychologically) of white supremacy**?
6. What does the work say about the **creativity and power of people of color**?

Gender Theory (1960s-present)

Gender theory is concerned with the ways in which literature reinforces or challenges **gender dynamics**. It is based originally on **feminism**, a belief system that **promotes the equality** between both sexes and in both traditional representations of gender, and often includes nontraditional expressions of gender and sexuality. It examines how **aspects of our culture are inherently patriarchal** while striving to **expose the explicit and implicit misogyny** in writing about women. Gender theory is also concerned with less obvious forms of **marginalization** such as the **exclusion of women writers** from the traditional literary canon.

Common Characteristics of Gender Theory

- Women are **oppressed by patriarchy economically, politically, socially, and psychologically**; patriarchal ideology is the primary means by which they are kept so oppressed.
- In every domain where patriarchy reigns, **woman is “the other”**: she is marginalized, defined only by her difference from male norms and values.
- While **biology determines our sex** (male or female), **culture determines our gender** (man or woman, masculine or feminine).
- All feminist activity has as its ultimate goal to change the world by **prompting gender equality**.

Questions to Ask in a Gender Theory Reading of a Text

1. How is the **relationship** between men and women portrayed?
2. What are the **power relationships** between men and women (or characters assuming male/female roles)?
3. What constitutes **masculinity and femininity** in the text? What are masculine characteristics? Feminine characteristics?
4. How do **characters** embody these traits? Do **characters take on traits from opposite genders**? How so? How does this change their actions or others' reactions to them?
5. What happens to these characters based on how they act “appropriately” based on their **expected societal gender roles**?
6. What does the work reveal about the **operations (economically, politically, socially, or psychologically) of patriarchy**?
7. What does the work say about **women's creativity or power**?

Social Class Theory (1930s-present)

Karl Marx argued that the way people think and behave in any society is determined by basic economic factors.

In his view, **class – both economic and social – drives everything** about the way we see and experience the world around us, including our interactions, dreams, desires, goals, motivations, and ultimately actions. He believed that those **groups who own and control** major industries (ie., the elite, wealthy) could **exploit the rest of the population**, through employment and by forcing their own **values and beliefs** onto other social groups.

Social class theory assumes there will **always be conflict** between the upper, middle, and lower (working) classes.

When we use social class theory, we are interested in answering the overarching question: who **benefits**? How are others being **oppressed**? And how does the text function as a **commodity** that reproduces certain social beliefs or practices to influence **power dynamics** among and between classes?

Questions to Ask in a Social Class Theory Reading of a Text

1. What is the **social class of the author**? Which class does the work claim to **represent**?
2. What is the **value of work in the text**, based on the the values of the society?
3. What **values** does the text and its messages **reinforce**? What values does the text and its message **subvert**?
4. Whom does it **benefit** if the text is accepted/successful/believed, etc.?
5. What **conflicts** can be seen between the values the work champions and those it portrays?
6. **What social classes do the characters represent? Is the representation of the characters and their classes/experiences realistic?**
7. **How do characters from different classes interact or conflict? What meaning can we derive from these conflicts?**

Applying Literary Theory to *A Raisin in the Sun*

Critical Race Theory	Gender Theory	Social Class Theory

Critical Theory as a Vehicle for Social Justice: Recommendations & Considerations

How can literary theory help further the goals of social justice?

- Using literary theory in the classroom engages and empowers **students and teachers** who are typically **underrepresented or silenced** by dominant ideologies
- Using literary theory requires us to **diversify the content** and/or **challenge canonical texts**
- Using literary theory gives students a toolkit of vocabulary, critical reading strategies, and the context to **apply meaning to texts in the world** around them (newspapers, magazines, advertisements, film, television, etc.)

Key Considerations:

- **Intersectionality** is a term that describes how various elements of one's identity—race, sex, class, national origin, and sexual orientation—and their combination plays out in various ways (ie. what it means to be a black woman vs. a black man, a straight woman vs. a gay man, etc.). **People can have privilege in some ways and not in others.**
- It is **not helpful** to **reduce the experience** of a category (gender or race) to the experience of one sub-group (*all* white women or *all* African-Americans), nor to ask one member of the category **to speak for the entirety** of the group. Although all oppressed people share the commonality of oppression, **oppression varies** by gender, class, race, etc., so the aims and strategies will differ for each of these groups. **Additionally, people identify both as individuals and as members of groups, and both identities matter.**
- **Sharing the airtime** is a necessary component of doing this work with students. Teachers must be careful **not to perpetuate** current systems of implicit bias or unequal distribution of voices when introducing these theories to adolescents. Although guilt, fear, and anger are common and expected emotions to emerge, remind students that they are not expected to become **experts in this work** overnight and that we **difficult conversations are necessary to grow and build understanding.**

Additional/Suggested Resources:

- The Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL): [Literary Theory and Schools of Criticism](#)
- *Critical Encounters in High School English: Teaching Literary Theory to Adolescents*, Deborah Appleman
- *Literary Criticism: an introduction to theory and practice*, Charles E. Bressler

- *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*, Ross Murfin & Supryia M. Ray
- *Literary Theory: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Mary Klages
- *Women, Race & Class*, Angela Y. Davis
- *Queer Theory, Gender Theory: An Instant Primer*, Riki Wilchins
- *The Critical Experience*, David Cowles
- *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Patricia Hill Collins
- *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, Julie Rivkin & Michael Ryan

For more information or questions, please contact us!

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