How does applying a critical perspective affect the meaning of a text?

What is literary theory?

Literary theory is the body of ideas and methods we use in the practical reading of literature. Literary theory does not refer to the meaning of a work of literature but to the theories that reveal what literature can mean. A very basic way of thinking about literary theory is that these ideas act as different “lenses” critics use to view and talk about art, literature, and even culture based on certain assumptions (principles) within that school of theory.

While no single lens gives us the clearest view (as most of us view a text through multiple lenses), taking on a variety of perspective can help us discover new and interesting ways of seeing the world.

“Literature is so fascinating. It's always up for interpretation, and could be a hundred different things to a hundred different people. It's never the same thing twice.” — Sara Raasch

Adapted from: https://owl.purdue.edu/owl; https://www.iep.utm.edu; Literary and Cultural Theory by Donald E. Hall
This theory considers readers’ reactions to literature as vital to interpreting the meaning of a text.

**Guiding Questions:**
- What does the text expect of the reader?
- What experiences, morals, and world views does the reader bring to the text?
- How does the reader’s personal background affect the interpretation of a text?
- What choices and strategies does the reader use to create meaning?
- How do various readers react differently to the same text?
- What evidence does the reader cite to support conclusions or generalizations?

**Principles of Reader-Response Theory**

1. The “meaning” of a text is not wholly intrinsic to the text.

2. The reading experience may be intensely private and subjective. It is important to carefully and thoroughly investigate different interpretations.

3. Texts often presuppose an “ideal” reader, while a “real” reader has his or her own background, context, expectations, and interpretive strategies.

4. As readers proceed through a text, they make choices and engage in interpretive processes that may be traced and analyzed.

5. The success of reader-response analysis depends largely on the critic’s meta-theoretical approach to the reading process and the quality of the evidence presented to support any conclusions or generalizations.
This theory examines race and ethnicity to understand how systemic racism affects cultural perceptions and to find ways to create a more equitable future for all people groups.

**Race & Ethnicity Theory**

**Guiding Questions:**
- What is the significance of race and ethnicity throughout the story?
- How does racism function as a persistent force affecting the characters?
- Where, how, and to what ends does race shape the ways the characters interact with one another?
- How do cultural perceptions regarding race and ethnicity both empower and oppress the characters in the story?
- How does ethnocentrism develop and how does it perpetuate prejudice?
- How do the characters combat or fail to combat racism?

**Principles of Race & Ethnicity Theory**

1. Categories of race and ethnicity have been used in ways that have empowered and oppressed.
2. The differentiation of peoples is reflected in and reinforced by language.
3. An understanding of textual reflections of racism and ethnocentrism (viewing one's own culture as appropriate for all) demands an attention to the cultural history and belief systems of the social group(s) being portrayed and discussed.
4. The analysis of racism and ethnocentrism in texts from the past may have relevance to the ways we live our lives today.
5. The analysis of race and ethnicity can serve as a starting point for positive forms of social change in the future.
Principles of Marxist Theory

1. Marxist theorists are sympathetic to the working class and distrust the wealthy class because of the oppressive power structure.

2. Marxist scholars seek to expose problems relating to capitalism, wealth inequality, and class struggle.

3. Art and literature are sites for the playing out of a symbolic form of class struggle.

4. Marxist theory examines commodities, and possessions that give power. Typical commodities are things like land and money but can also be things like social position, knowledge, beauty, or even a person.

5. All artistic productions are commodities that can and must be understood in terms of the production of surplus value (i.e. who creates the art and who benefits from it).

Guiding Questions:

- What social classes do the characters represent?
- How do characters from different classes interact or conflict? How are they depicted?
- What role does class play in the story? What is the author’s analysis of class relations?
- How do characters address or overcome oppression?
- Does the text support the status quo or try to undermine it?
- What does the text say about oppression? Or are social conflicts overlooked?
- Does the society depicted in the story value things for their usefulness, for their potential resale or trade, or for their power to convey social status?
This theory looks at the portrayal of female characters in relation to other genders and society in order to highlight positive and negative aspects.

**Guiding Questions:**
- How are female characters portrayed in the story?
- How is the relationship between men and women portrayed?
- How are gender roles defined?
- What constitutes masculinity and femininity?
- How do characters embody these traits?
- Do characters take on traits from opposite genders? How so? How does this change others’ reactions to them?
- What does the work reveal about the operations (economically, politically, socially, or psychologically) of patriarchy?

**Principles of Feminist Theory**

1. Women are often oppressed by patriarchy (male power structure) economically, politically, socially, and psychologically. In every domain where patriarchy reigns, woman is marginalized, defined only by her difference from male norms and values.

2. All of Western (Anglo-European) civilization is deeply rooted in patriarchal ideology, i.e. favors the male perspective.

3. While biology determines our sex (male or female), culture determines our gender (scales of masculine and feminine).

4. Gender issues play a part in every aspect of human production and experience, including the production and experience of literature, whether we are consciously aware of these issues or not.

5. All feminist activity, including feminist theory and literary criticism, ultimately aims to promote gender equality.