

An Introduction to Literary Lenses

Literary theories were developed as a means to understand the various ways people read texts and the world around them. Some lenses will be more appropriate for particular works than others at times and it is your job to discern when to use a particular lens. The following theories are just that, *theories*. Approach them as you would a scientist, without any emotional attachment to any particular one. You do not have to believe or agree with a theory to understand and correctly apply it. Your goal is to understand the literary theories below.

Post Colonial Criticism

✓ Post Colonial Criticism Explained

➤ Postcolonial Criticism is generally understood to be the analysis of literary works produced in countries and cultures that were under the control of European colonial powers and analysis of texts written about colonized places and peoples by authors from colonizing powers.

➤ The effects of colonization cannot be assumed to have ended. Even after the removal of European governance, there can be no reversion to pre-colonial societies. As a result, literature dealing with modern implications of colonialism can certainly be examined from a postcolonial criticism perspective.

✓ Post Colonial Assumptions

➤ Colonialism is a powerful, destructive historical force that shapes not only the political futures of the countries involved, but also identities of the colonized and colonizing people.

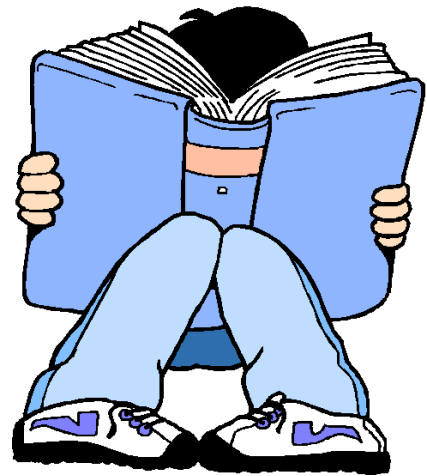
➤ Successful colonization depends on "othering" the people colonized. That is, the colonized are seen as dramatically different from and lesser than the colonizers.

➤ Because of this, literature written in colonizing cultures often distorts the experiences and realities of colonized people. Literature written by colonized people often includes attempts to articulate more empowered identities and reclaim cultures in the face of colonization.

✓ The Scramble for Africa

➤ The colonial project started later in Africa than in any other part of the world, happening largely between 1880-1914.

➤ Between 1835-1880, Europeans had explored and mapped large portions of Africa, but had done little in terms of developing direct control of any colonies. In 1875, only 10% of Africa was controlled by European powers directly.





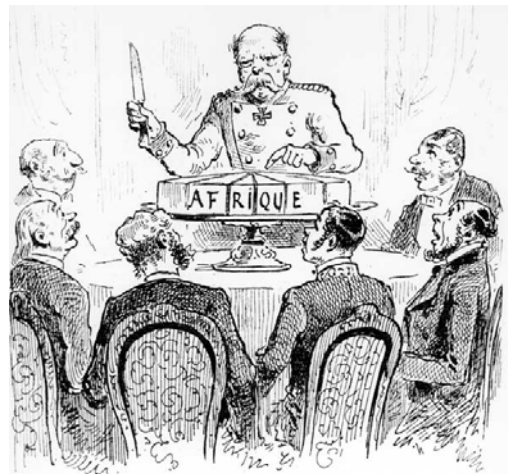
- The exploration of Africa by people like Henry Stanley opened the way for Europeans to begin the colonization of Africa.
- Concerned with the growing potential for conflict over African territories, the powers of Europe convened the Berlin Conference in 1884 to discuss developing a plan to divide the territory.
- The Conference established The Principle of Effectivity, stating that powers could only hold onto colonies if they had actual control of them. This policy encouraged a more militaristic approach in Africa.
- The Berlin Conference kicks off the Scramble for Africa, so that, by 1902, 90% of Africa was under direct European control.
- By 1914, the only remaining independent states were Liberia and Ethiopia.
- The Battle of Omdurman provides an instructive

example of the new policy

1. Battle between Anglo-Egyptian forces and Sudanese warriors, as part of the attempt by the British to reclaim the Sudan.
2. This battle was a crushing demonstration of the relative power of European and African forces. In the four hour battle, 10,000 Sudanese were killed, 13,000 wounded. The British suffered 48 deaths and 382 wounded men.
 - a. Trivia Note: Winston Churchill was at the battle, as part of the 21st Lancers.

✓ Critique of European Centrality/Universality

- Post-colonial literature is concerned with breaking down the assumption (stated or unstated) that European literature and culture are the core of culture. They reject the notion of "otherness" that separates non-Western literature from European works.
- Identification of colonized lands and people as exotic, different, wild, savage, etc. establish the European perspective as "normal", delegitimizing the other culture.
- Construction of The Other, something that is separate/mysterious out of colonial peoples. By reducing their literature and traditions to the exotic, it is easier to diminish their value.
- In The Post-Colonial Studies Reader, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin explain that education often establishes the locally English or British as normative through critical claims to "universality" of the values embodied in English literary texts, and it



represents the colonized to themselves as inherently inferior beings-- "wild," "barbarous," "uncivilized." (426)

✓ **Theory of Place and Displacement**

➤ Another major concern of post-colonial literature and criticism is concern with place and displacement.

1. A sense of self may have been lost by dislocation, resulting from enslavement, forced migration, or removal.
2. A sense of place may have been lost by cultural denigration, the conscious and unconscious oppression of the indigenous personality and culture by a supposedly superior racial or cultural model.

➤ The alienation of place is seen in peoples as diverse as Canadian free settlers separated from their native England and forcibly enslaved Africans.

➤ Construction of Place. Ashcroft and Griffiths explain: This gap occurs for those whose language seems inadequate to describe a new place, for those whose language is systematically destroyed by enslavement, and for those whose language has been rendered unprivileged by the imposition of the language of a colonizing power. Some admixture of one or other of these models can describe the situation of all post-colonial societies. In each case a condition of alienation is inevitable until the colonizing language has been replaced or appropriated as English.

✓ **Theory of the Colonizer and the Colonized (Homi Bhabha)**

➤ Developed theory of hybridity, arguing that the relationship between colonizer and colonized is inherently mingled, altering the identity of both.

1. The colonizer is affected by mimicry, the always slightly alien and distorted way in which the colonized, either out of choice or under duress, will repeat the colonizer's ways and discourse. Because of this mimicry, the colonizer will see herself in a mirror that slightly distorts her image, unsettling her sense of identity.
2. Racial stereotyping is a pattern of repeated identity construction and alteration—by having to constantly justify the truth of one's stereotypes, the colonizer constantly re-creates their own identity in opposition.

➤ Focuses his study on liminal negotiations, interstices and borders between the domains of difference. In other words, he focuses on the connection between colonizer and colonized, borders, points of conflict and contention, and argues that the most meaningful post-colonial transactions take place here.

1. Bhabha seeks to find the "location of culture" in the marginal, "haunting," "unhomely" spaces between dominant social formations.

➤ Bhabha's also attacks the Western production and implementation of certain binary oppositions. The oppositions targeted by Bhabha include center/margin, civilized/savage, and enlightened/ignorant. Bhabha proceeds by destabilizing the binaries insofar as the first term of the binary is allowed to unthinkingly dominate the second.

✓ **Theory of Orientalism (Edward Said)**





- "My contention is that Orientalism is fundamentally a political doctrine willed over the Orient because the Orient was weaker than the West, which elided the Orient's difference with its weakness. . . . As a cultural apparatus
- Orientalism is all aggression, activity, judgment, will-to-truth, and knowledge" (Orientalism, p. 204).
- Primarily focused on Western conception of Middle East, Said's work is an appropriate critique of how Western literature and culture define and create Eastern culture.
- For Said, all discourse is inherently ideological, and for that reason, the West actually created, rather than described, the divide between the East and West.
- Said believes that Western culture constructs the Orient through imaginative representations
 1. Seemingly factual reports, history & culture, and literature
 2. Taken together, these forms of Western writing form a discourse—a loose system of supposed knowledge and understanding
 3. This discourse forms a type of hegemony, a domination of the culture that is deemed inferior.
- While Said concedes that, to some extent, all cultures define each other in terms of the exotic, when combined with military and economic dominance, the result can be disastrous.
- Two Purposes of Orientalism
 1. Legitimizes Western imperialism and expansionism
 2. Works to convince "natives" that Western culture represents the ideal, universal civilization
- Defines the West by Opposition to the East
 1. The East is depicted as sensual, irrational, primitive and despotic (Also defined as feminine)
 2. The West (by contrast) is seen as rational, democratic, and progressive (masculine)

✓ Example of Post Colonial Criticism

- "In the Great Gatsby, a significant example of Nick's othering of ethnic characters occurs when Gatsby is driving him home to New York City in his enormous luxury car. Nick sees "three modern [fashionable] Negroes" in "a limousine...driven by a white chauffeur." He describes them as two bucks and a girl" and says "I laughed out loud as the yolks of their eyeballs rolled toward us in haughty rivalry." Of course, Nick's un-self-conscious racism is obvious in his othering of these other characters: the black men are 'bucks' - animals rather than men - and the description of their wide-stretched, rolling eyes resonates strongly with racist stereotypes that portrayed African Americans as foolish, childish, overly dramatic, comic characters."

✓ Strategies for Post Colonial Criticism

- Search the text for reference to colonization or current and formerly colonized people. In these references, how are the colonized people portrayed? How is the process of colonization portrayed?

- Analyze how the text deals with cultural conflicts between the colonizing culture and the colonized tradition.
- Consider and ask questions about examples of the following topics:
 1. The native people's initial encounter with the colonizers and the disruption of the indigenous culture
 2. The journey of the European outsider through an unfamiliar wilderness with a native guide.
 3. Othering (the colonizers' treatment of members of the indigenous culture are less than fully human) and colonial oppression in all its forms.
 4. Mimicry (the attempt of the colonized to be accepted by imitating dress, behavior, speech, and lifestyle of the colonizers)
 5. Exile (the experience of being an 'outsider' in one's own land or a foreign wanderer in Britain.
 6. Post-independence exuberance followed by disillusionment.
 7. The struggle for the individual and cultural collective identity and the related themes of alienation unhomeliness (feeling that one has no sense of 'home' or cultural belonging), double consciousness (feeling torn between the social and psychological demands of two antagonistic cultures), hybridity (experiencing one's cultural identity as a hybrid of two or more cultures, which feeling is sometimes described as a positive alternative to unhomeliness)
 8. The need for continuity with a precolonial past and a self-definition of a post colonial future.