

Table 8.3: Critical Lenses

Critical Lens	Description	Questions
Reader Response	Examines the effect of a text on the reader	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did the text make you feel? • What do you think the text means? • What parts of the text did you identify with? • What experiences did the text remind you of?
Formalist or New Criticism	Examines the various components of a text to draw conclusions about its meaning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What literary elements, literary devices, symbolism, and themes are in the text? • What are the strengths and weaknesses of the text? • What is the purpose of the text, and does it accomplish that purpose?
Historical or Biographical Criticism	Examines a text within its historical context (social, political, economic, cultural, or intellectual climate)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did historical context influence the events and themes in the text? • What does this text tell us about its author? Why did he or she write it?
Feminist or Gender Criticism	Examines gender roles in a text	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What gender roles or identities are present in the text? • Does the text portray characters positively or negatively depending on their gender? • How does the text affirm or reject sexist ideas?
Marxist and Social Power Criticism	Examines social class in a text	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does the text portray social classes? • Does the text portray characters positively or negatively depending on their social class? • How does the text relate power to money and social class?
Psychological Criticism	Examines a text as an expression of the mind, feelings, and desires of its author	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What psychological conflicts drive the characters or the plot? • What psychological concepts can help us understand the way the author sees the world?
Archetypal Criticism	Examines patterns and models of storytelling across many texts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What universal themes, situations, symbols, and characters are present in the text? • How is the hero or villain similar to heroes or villains in other stories?

Note: This is a partial list. For a complete list and descriptions of critical lenses to use for literary criticism, visit “Literary Theory and Schools of Criticism” at <http://owl.english.purdue.edu> (Purdue University’s Online Writing Lab).

Source: Appleman, D. (2009). Critical encounters in high school English: Teaching literary theory to adolescents (2nd ed.). New York: Teachers College Press.