

ACTIVITY 16

Critical Encounters: Reading the World

Literary theory raises those issues which are often left submerged beneath the mass of information contained in the course, and it also asks questions about how the institution of great literature works. What makes a "great work" great? Who makes the decisions about what will be taught? Why are authors grouped into certain historical periods? The answers to fundamental questions like these are often unarticulated assumptions on the part of both the professor (teacher) and the students. Socrates said that the unexamined life is not worth living. . . . Literary theory is at its best when it helps us realize what we are really doing when we study literature.

—S. Bonnycastle

1. Based on our reading as well as class discussions, briefly describe in your own words the following literary theories. (Spend no more than a few minutes on this part of the exercise.)

psychological criticism

feminist literary theory

Marxism

reader-response theory

other? (Choose one as a group)

2. In groups of three or four, select a literary work with which you are all familiar. It could be a poem, a short story, a play, or a novel. Or focus on the novel you are currently using for your reader's choice. Then think of two theories that would be fruitful to use to explore that text. In the spaces

below, briefly describe how each of those two theories might be used to illuminate the text.

Theory 1:

Theory 2:

3. Now, think of something you've read, heard, or seen outside of class that particularly struck you as worth thinking about. It could be an interaction between two people, an MTV video, a song, a film or a scene from a film, a magazine article, or an ad. Briefly explain it below.
4. What lens might you use to help you understand this event or artifact? How would that lens affect or increase your understanding?
5. Can we use critical lenses to "read" the world? Explain.
6. What, if anything, do you find difficult about reading literature with critical lenses?

Appelman, Deborah. Critical Encounters in High School English. Teachers College Press: New York, 2000.