

Critical Lenses – Using Literary Theory with Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*

Overview: For this assignment you will research a form of literary criticism, which some scholars will call “critical lenses.” The choices include, but are not limited to: Archetypal Criticism, Autobiographical Theory, Deconstruction, Existentialism, Expressionism, Feminism, Linguistics and Literary Theory, Marxism, Neoclassicism, Psychoanalytic Theory, Reader-Response Criticism, and Realism. Once you have selected (your selection must be approved) and researched an appropriate form of literary criticism, you will need to define, summarize and explain the theory in an introductory paper. You will use this theory to research elements, themes, characters, or events in *Beloved* by Toni Morrison. You will need to establish a proper thesis statement. What is your paper about? What are you going to try to prove? Please note the formatting requirements: Your paper must be typed, double-spaced, use something akin to Times New Roman 12-point font, 1” margins and include MLA formatted citations. You will need to write at least four pages for a passing grade and six pages altogether if you’d like to try for an A.

Purpose and Audience: The purpose of this assignment is to build your confidence and abilities as an interpreter of literature, as well as give you practice in using critical lenses. Your main audience for this paper includes yourself, your classmates and me. You may assume that your primary audience has read the literary text. You must still reference BOTH the title of the work and its author in your introduction.

Procedures and Requirements:

1. Your group will be assigned a modern literary theory to research.
2. Your group will write about the literary theory and post links on the wiki.
3. As a group, you will write at least one full page (300-500) words as a summary of the assigned literary theory that your group is assigned. You will do all of the research together and share information on the wiki, but you must also hand in a paper draft. (Note that you must cite all information.)
4. As a group, you will write a 1200 to 2000 word essay that makes a claim (based on one significant aspect of the literary theory you were assigned as a group) and explain a problem, theme, character, etc. in the novel while looking through your critical lens. You will post your paper to the wiki as well as hand in a paper draft.
5. Your group will present the literary theory to the class and lead a discussion based on the papers you wrote.

Literary Theory Research Links and Draft:

Define, summarize and explain the theory in a brief one-page introductory paper.

- This draft should be 300-500 words long and is due _____.

Writing Workshop Rough Draft:

Within the focus of your critical lens, you will compose a complete draft that makes a tightly-focused claim about one aspect of the novel that you find particularly striking, problematic, interesting, puzzling, or otherwise worthy of discussion. Be sure to support your claim with textual references, to anticipate and respond to any important counterarguments to your claim, and to explain the significance of your claim. A printed copy of your workshop draft will be due first. Your group will work together on the rough draft for a few days before your final draft is due. This due date is important for you and for your writing group who will be learning with you. Missing the writing group workshop draft due date will likely result in a reduction from the final score of your paper.

- Your rough draft should be 4-5 pages (1,200-1,500 words) long and is due _____.

Final draft:

The act of interpretation assumes communication with others. For this stage of your paper, you will need to engage in a sort of verbal and written conversation with others who are interested in interpreting the literary

text. To complete your final draft, revise your paper in any way that you think will strengthen it, with the additional requirement that you now draw upon:

- ideas about this text from one or more classmates AND
- professionally published writing about the text or author.

In other words, you should incorporate the ideas from your writing group and at least three published authors into your paper, either to illuminate or support some point you wish to make or to show a contrasting or alternative point of view. You may quote, paraphrase, or summarize; you should use MLA parenthetical citations and works cited entries to acknowledge your sources.

- Your final draft should be over five pages (over 1,500 words) long and is due _____.

Grading: Your Literary Theory final draft is worth a significant part of your course grade. It will be graded holistically, meaning I will assess the paper as a whole—with emphasis given to content, then organization, then style, formatting, and grammar and usage conventions. Quality essays will:

- Make a claim (based on your interpretation of one of the characters and his/her actions and words in the novel through your critical lens) and explain its significance.
- Support the claim with evidence that is selected and presented in a manner that your audience will find persuasive.
- Anticipate and respond to any important counter-arguments to the claim.
- Incorporate relevant references to the text and to ideas of peers and published authors.
- Present ideas in a clear, cohesive, and logical manner that supports the purpose of the paper as well as communication with the intended audience.
- Cite the text—use actual quotes from Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.
- Cite your research on literary theory.

Document in MLA style the sources for any cited words or ideas!

Your paper must include appropriate stylistic, formatting, grammatical, and usage conventions to support the purpose of the document and facilitate communication with the intended audience.

Topic Ideas: There are several broad angles you might want to think about or look at when you make your claim. You are welcome to use the following ideas to get you started:

- Discuss your observations about a particular element(s) of the text, the role it play in the text as a whole, and its significance for readings of the text.
- Discuss the use of a particular critical lens (e.g., feminist, Marxist, psychoanalytic, etc.) to interpret the text. Would another lens fit your idea better?
- Critically analyze the author's craft and/or use of literary conventions. She is purposeful in her choices. Make sure you understand that Toni Morrison chose what to write about.
- Evaluate the author's role in constructing and promoting values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors.
- Critically analyze the roles that the text implies the reader should take, and discuss the ways that you accept, question, resist, and/or reject those roles.
- You are welcome, of course, to try an approach not listed here. Feel free to ask for help in selecting, narrowing, or fleshing out a topic of interest to you.