

Questions for Short Stories

Focusing on Literary Criticism Theories

(Prewriting for your Analytical Essay)

Apply a set of questions that best lends itself to the lens (literary theory) or interpretation of your chosen story. Then, choose one or two questions as a potential topic to elaborate the connection between the text and the theoretical approach. This elaboration will be your essay.

Historism

- What language/characters/events present in the work reflect the current events of the author's day?
- Are there words in the text that have changed their meaning from the time of the writing?
- How are such events interpreted and presented?
- How are events' interpretation and presentation a product of the culture of the author?
- Does the work's presentation support or condemn the event?
- Can it be seen to do both?
- How does this portrayal criticize the leading political figures or movements of the day?
- How does the literary text function as part of a continuum with other historical/cultural texts from the same period...?
- How can we use a literary work to "map" the interplay of both traditional and subversive discourses circulating in the culture in which that work emerged and/or the cultures in which the work has been interpreted?
- How does the work consider traditionally marginalized populations?

Feminist theory

- How is the relationship between men and women portrayed?
- What are the power relationships between men and women (or characters assuming male/female roles)?
- How are male and female 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?

- What does the work imply about the possibilities of sisterhood as a mode of resisting patriarchy?
- What does the work say about women's creativity?
- What does the history of the work's reception by the public and by the critics tell us about the operation of patriarchy?
- What role the work play in terms of women's literary history and literary tradition? (Tyson)

Psychoanalytic criticism

- How do the operations of repression structure or inform the work?
- Are there any oedipal dynamics - or any other family dynamics - are work here?
- How can character's behavior, narrative events, and/or images be explained in terms of psychoanalytic concepts of any kind (for example...fear or fascination with death, sexuality - which includes love and romance as well as sexual behavior - as a primary indicator of psychological identity or the operations of ego-id-superego)?
- What does the work suggest about the psychological being of its author?
- What might a given interpretation of a literary work suggest about the psychological motives of the reader?
- Are there prominent words in the piece that could have different or hidden meanings? Could there be a subconscious reason for the author using these "problem words"?

Marxist theory

- Whom does it benefit if the work or effort is accepted/successful/believed, etc.?
- What is the social class of the author?
- Which class does the work claim to represent?
- What values does it reinforce?
- What values does it subvert?
- What conflict can be seen between the values the work champions and those it portrays?
- What social classes do the characters represent?
- How do characters from different classes interact or conflict?