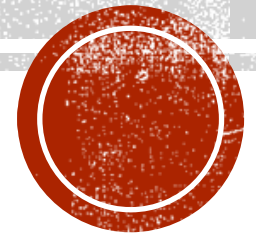




LITERARY THEORY



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By: Kelly Pennell



UNDERSTANDING AND INTERPRETING LITERATURE: WHAT ROLE DOES LITERARY THEORY PLAY?

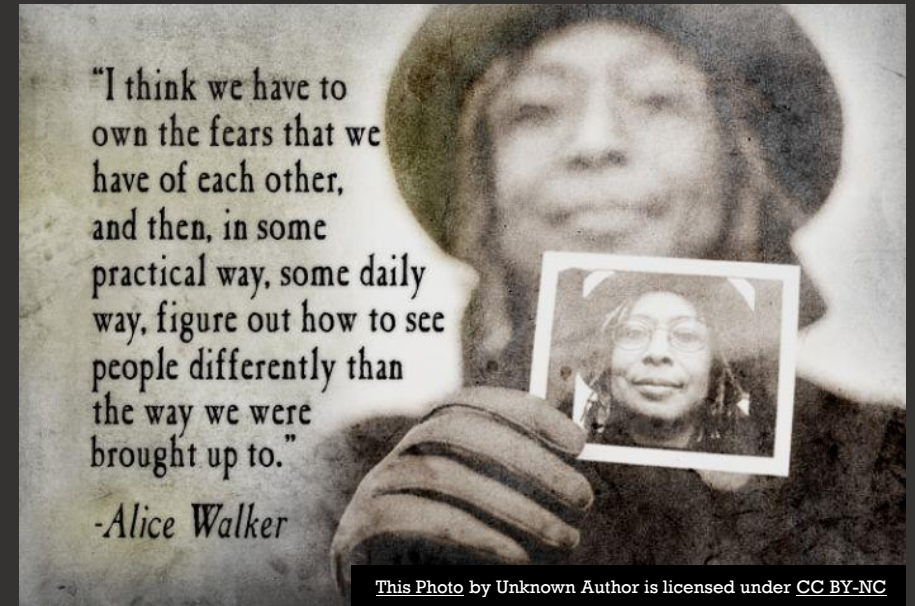
Theorists utilize literary theory to break down literature into many different facets. Be it form, structure, author history, culture, etc. these categories are considered of utmost importance. Brewton writes, “Literary theory refers to any principles derived from internal analysis of literary texts or from knowledge external to the text that can be applied in multiple interpretive situations” (Brewton). Some literature can evoke many theories and be open to much interpretation. It is imperative to keep an open mind and know that theories continue to evolve. Looking through a different lens allows a newfound understanding and appreciation of literature.

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THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF "EVERYDAY USE" BY: ALICE WALKER

When this story was written in the 1970's, there was a movement making its way into the African American culture, as their historical contributions were getting the recognition they deserved. This played a major role in the creation of Walker's story. African American struggles are a common theme seen throughout "Everyday Use." Culture and heritage are also made known through the mother, as well as her two daughters. The historical context of this story concentrates on three kinds of women that Walker felt were missing in American Literature. Washington writes, "... the character who is physically and psychologically abused and who may retreat into insanity as a result; the character who is conflicted about wanting to be part of the American mainstream while fighting to find her own identity; and the character who asserts her agency and autonomy" (Walker 2). The three kinds of women are made known through Mama, Dee (oldest daughter), and Maggie (youngest daughter). Society at the time also made a big impact on Walker and how she wrote this story, specifically the Black Power and Women's Movements. Christian writes, "...about Walker as both a participant in and critic of the Black Power and women's movements of the 1960's and 1970's. Walker's critique of Black Power movement ideologues and advocates can be seen in her portrayal of Dee" (Walker 2). Dee is revealed as very prideful of her African heritage through her newfound language and clothes but neglects to honor her roots by changing the family name given to her.

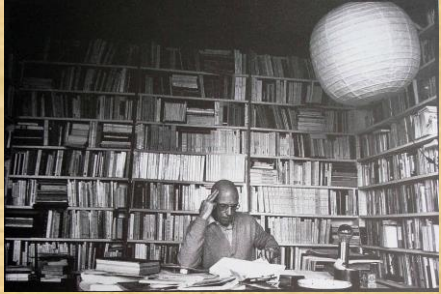


"I think we have to own the fears that we have of each other, and then, in some practical way, some daily way, figure out how to see people differently than the way we were brought up to."

-Alice Walker

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RATIONALE IN CHOSEN THEORIES



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New Historicism

One of the theories I will apply to “Everyday Use” is New Historicism. I feel this theory will correlate well with the historical context of this short story. The Purdue Writing Lab states, “This school, influenced by structuralist and post-structuralist theories, seeks to reconnect a work with the time period in which it was produced and identify it with the cultural and political movements of the time” (Purdue Writing Lab). New Historicism focuses on the author’s life, how it ties in with their piece, the influences that affected their way of life, and how that gets incorporated into their work. Walker does just that as she pulls from the events of her time (1970’s) and her experiences to create this thought-provoking piece. One thing to remember when using this theory is to keep your thoughts subjective, as opinions of what occurred during that time are different from other points of view and experiences.



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Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory is the second notion I will be applying to “Everyday Use.” This theory relates well to the short story as its focus relies heavily on racism transforming due to Civil Rights. The Purdue Writing Lab states, “In adopting this approach, CRT scholars attempt to understand how victims of systemic racism are affected by cultural perceptions of race and how they are able to represent themselves to counter prejudice” (Purdue Writing Lab). In “Everyday Use,” conversations referring to the Civil War, oppression, poverty, and white men connect to the fundamentals of the Critical Race Theory. As racism is still prevalent in society today, we want to look at this story through the lens that lets us try to experience this persecution, respond to it, and eliminate it all together.



ARISING OF THEORIES AND PROBLEMS ADDRESSED

New Historicism, American in its origin, began in the 1980's and continued to gain acceptance in the 90's. With Michel Foucault and Stephen Greenblatt at the head of this theory, their focus on discourse and its connection to power propelled this theory into existence.

Understanding historical context from an author's life and how that is worked into their pieces is the main objective in this theory. Bertens states, "The literary text, then, is always part and parcel of a much wider cultural, political, social, and economic dispensation. Far from being untouched by the historical moment of its creation, the literary text is directly involved in history" (Bertens 155). This theory encompasses the influences from the author's life during their time period, and how that will impact their work.

Critical Race Theory began in the 1970's and continued to grow in popularity through the 80's and 90's. The Purdue Writing Lab states, "Closely connected to such fields as philosophy, history, sociology, and law, CRT scholarship traces racism in America through the nation's legacy of slavery, the Civil Rights Movement, and recent events. In doing so, it draws from work by writers like Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King, Jr., and others studying law, feminism, and post-structuralism" (Purdue Writing Lab). This theory is significant in that it allows the reader to experience these oppressions through the lens of the author, so we can respond to it by purging this prejudice from society.





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