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## Telescopes and Spyglasses: Using Literary Theories in High School Classrooms

Danielle M. Rains  
*Bowling Green State University, dm rains@bgsu.edu*

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## **Telescopes and Spyglasses**

### *Using Literary Theories In High School Classrooms*

Dear Teacher:

We are about to embark on a grand adventure together, one you will eventually bring your students on as well. We will visit seemingly strange lands, each with a different way of seeing the world. The path may be rough, but this book will be your guide, and I will be with you every step of the way.

The Common Core demands that students be able to engage with the texts they read on a deeper, more analytic level, drawing inferences from specific moments in the text that lead them to a better understanding of what that particular text means. Students are being asked to not only come up with themes and messages in texts, but also to defend them with a knowledge of the text itself. While many students will find that drawing inferences from what they read is not difficult to do, you, the teacher, will find that it is even easier for them once they have a knowledge base to build on, a vocabulary to use when explaining how they got to their theme, message, or interpretation. For student responses to be meaningful, they need to be original; different students read the same text differently. We, as teachers, need to give them the tools to engage the process of drawing inferences from what they read. That is what teaching critical literary theory does for your students. It provides them with the building blocks with which they will craft their interpretations. It provides them with a set of different frameworks with which to view the world around them, as well as the world of the text.

Many of you may already be doing this in your higher-level classes, and it is wonderful. I think it can be done with all of your students. With the support you can provide them, any student can gain an understanding of how different theories function and how they can impact their reading of a text. High school students should be exposed to all different types of theories so they have a way to connect with the books they read, and can see that there is more than one way to read a text, regaining control of their interpretations. Teaching literary theories explicitly allows students to take a more active role in their own literary interpretation. Literary theories allow students the chance to bring their own understanding to the texts they read, giving them a way to talk about what they read and how they interpret what they read. They guide reading with a focus, then allow for students to bring out their individual voice and interpretation within the process of making meaning. The knowledge of the presence of multiple theories would be enough to show students that there is more than one right answer, but most theories go beyond that to show how, within each theoretical school, there are infinite possibilities for meaning. Too often, students try to make their analyses fit what the teacher wants; this emphasis on personality and individuality allows students to make their analyses reflect their own understanding of the messages expressed within the text.

This handbook is structured in a way that can be directly applied to the classroom. The theories are organized and ordered to build on one another; the skills that your students learn from one will help them complete the tasks of the next. Each chapter provides information about the theory, how to conduct a reading following the theory's guidelines, and how to introduce the

theory to your students. One good way to use these theories is to introduce them all at the beginning of the year, with the understanding that you and your students will be engaging with them more over the course of the year. The first chapter in the book covers New Criticism, the theoretical school most students take for granted as the way to read for English class. Everything discussed in this book stems from the New Critical concept of close reading; they build on each other as the chapters go on. The second theory is Psychoanalysis, asking students to read closely while looking for psychological development in particular. The third is Marxism, in which students read closely while looking out for class and economics. After that comes Feminism, which takes pieces from both Psychoanalysis and Marxism to talk about the experience of females. From there, each theoretical school adds more specific strategies, for reading and for writing, building on those that came before, culminating in Deconstruction, which your students will be prepared for, since they have been building their analytical skills slowly over time. They have actually been using it, without realizing it, in many of the theories they've mastered leading up to it.

This structure can be followed either by a single teacher over the course of the year or by a team of teachers throughout high school. Each theory can be applied to a unit already in place, as most can be applied to any book. To demonstrate this concept, I will be using F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby to explain how to read and how to write in the style of each literary theory. Each section includes a short description of each theory, information on how to read within the context of the theory, and information on how to help students write critical analyses.

I am glad you've decided to join me on this journey. This is just a book, words on a page. Without readers who are willing to explore the ideas I present, it would fade away into the unknown. Without teachers like you, these worlds would remain uncharted territory for students. This book will arm you with the tools you will need as we take this voyage together.

Welcome aboard.