Critical Lenses

Kim Vinh, Sequoia High School, Redwood City, Calif.
11th/12th grade English
Two 100-minute block periods

California ELA 11th/12th grade standards:
- Reading 3.5c: Evaluate the philosophical, political, religious, ethical, and social influences of the historical period that shaped the characters, plots, and settings.
- Reading 3.7b: Relate literary works and authors to the major themes and issues of their era.

Lesson Abstract: Students will learn the analytical practice of using a critical lens to read literature and examine events. Jose Orosco, in Cesar Chavez and the Commonsense of Nonviolence, introduces the concepts of structural and cultural violence in Chapter 4, “Refusing to be a Macho.” Often called a cultural or feminist lens, students can see this deeper understanding of events at play in Cesar Chavez’s speech “At Exposition Park,” as Chavez takes responsibility for the structural violence that “we” promote. From here, students will analyze the texts they have read (Like Water for Chocolate, Malcolm X) with different lenses to recognize the larger picture and to see trends between these two texts.

Guiding Questions:
- How does applying a critical lens help us deepen our understanding of an event?
- How can we see multiple perspectives on the same situation?

Content Essay:

Critical lenses in literature
The practice of applying critical lenses to literature asks students to consider various viewpoints on a common text, thus deepening their understanding of how many perspectives can exist at one time. Common critical lenses, or literary theories, can include psychological, historical, socioeconomic, feminist, or cultural lenses. These options are not mutually exclusive; a student can apply all of them, thus demonstrating that multiple perspectives can coexist. This exercise further demands higher order thinking skills from students, moving up Bloom’s taxonomy from understanding to applying, analyzing, and evaluating.

Orosco
Applying a critical cultural and feminist lens helped Cesar Chavez address the root causes of his community’s poverty, according to Orosco. As an organizer interested in making lasting social change, rather than quick fixes for current situations, Chavez understood how structural violence fed into the cycle of poverty and violence he saw daily on two levels: first,
the bigger picture of an economic hierarchy leaving farmworkers without a living wage to survive, and secondly, “the expressions of machismo among his activists” (Orosco 72).

The former situation of an underclass farmworker group being abused by a grower upperclass cannot be attributed to just one cause; instead it must take into account how social, political, economic, and cultural institutions all contributed. According to Orosco, “Western societies... are in fact permeated by a kind of violence that ‘to a certain extent, we have gotten used to, that is unconscionable social inequality, degrading discrimination, pauperization, and marginalization.’ This kind of violence damages people’s lives because it creates barriers that effectively deny people voice in the decisions that affect them” (72-73). Indeed, farmworker voices were disregarded in decisions about their pay, working conditions, and about pesticide use, but it was across the board, not just at one individual farm. Chavez’s solution thus needed to take into account the larger root causes for this widespread problem. He understood that prejudices against farmworkers “were more than merely the viewpoints of many bigoted individuals in California’s agriculture industry. They were closely intertwined within agribusiness’s organizational rules, procedures, and traditions” (Orosco 80). There was indeed an entire system of economics at play that led to continued low wages and a lack of organized action until Chavez was able to take a bird’s-eye view of the situation.

Secondly, Chavez saw past a narrow blaming of one source of inequality; he also used a lens of cultural criticism to identify machismo within his own community’s culture as another obstacle to achieving the community he wanted. According to Orosco,

“An early Chicana feminist newspaper, Hijas de Cuauhtemoc, argued in 1971 that young Chicago activists harbored attitudes toward women that damaged the potential of the movement: ‘Many of the Chicanos have sadly mistaken the idea that women are only good to make love to; women should stay at home and clean the house; and women don’t talk as heavy as men. They refuse to believe that Chicanas have intelligence and that the women could actually have feelings for ‘el movimiento’” (Orosco 86).

Chavez, raised with strong female figures in his family of his mother and grandmother, fought to include women in the movement; he also attempted to redefine masculinity as more than a hypermasculine ideal. He understood that full inclusion of women in the movement would only make it stronger and more sustainable for the future, and took that task on as a vital part of his role as leader.

**Chavez**

Chavez again includes his own community’s part in perpetuating poverty in a 1971 speech made “At Exposition Park.” Speaking to Vietnam War veterans, he poses the question, “What causes our children to take up guns to fight their brothers in lands far away?” (Chavez 119). Rather than blame the government and their heavy recruitment of poor minorities, or “put all the blame on the generals and the police and the growers and the other bosses,” Chavez instead accepts responsibility for the situation with his use of the pronoun “we” to begin his explanation (Chavez 120).
“We are also responsible. Some husbands prove to their children that might makes right by the way they beat on their own wives. Most of us honor violence in one way or another, in sports if not at home. We insist on our own way, grab for security, and trample on other people in the process” (Chavez 120).

Notable is Chavez’s humility in understanding and admitting his own role in a serious epidemic of violence and poverty. In a speech intended to show sympathy for veterans and their sacrifices, Chavez also calls for introspection and action from within. He names what we have done as well as what we have not: “We have not shown our children how to sacrifice for justice,” bringing to mind the difference often pointed out between a negative and a positive peace. Just as the lack of fighting does not really ensure a peaceful society (the concept of negative peace), the lack of viable options presented to young men for achieving their manhood will not solve the problem Chavez speaks of. Nonviolence as an active strategy creates the world we seek, Chavez understood, and likewise, the active creation of new alternatives to how young men seek manhood in affluence and war is necessary.

Revisiting classroom texts

This lens of looking at structure and culture can be useful in analyzing two texts taught in my classroom at the junior level: Like Water for Chocolate and The Autobiography of Malcolm X. Looking at the context and then the character choices through this lens can help students more deeply understand the texts both individually and in comparison with each other.

In Like Water for Chocolate, the main conflict stems from the restriction on the oldest daughter and main character, Tita, as she is culturally bound to stay home and take care of her widower mother until her mother dies. Her position in the home as cook and homemaker mirrors the expectations of women Chavez fought against; conversely, the few men in the text include a doctor and a revolutionary general, two hypermasculine roles. Applying a lens to this text, students can see a patriarchal hierarchy at play in severely limiting the options of any female in the text. They can also identify cultural machismo as a restriction to Tita’s growth as an individual, and to the mother’s insistence on this particular tradition. Without this lens, students oftentimes prescribe a surface explanation to the mother’s motivations: she is mean or bitter, or she doesn’t want her daughter to be happy, they will say. I hope to move students beyond simplistic answers.

The Autobiography of Malcolm X similarly documents violence that can be analyzed through a critical lens: both literal violent actions as occurred during a time of racial strife, as well as psychological violence and restrictions on individuals. According to Orosco, Galtung defines violence “as an action that causes actual human physical or psychological capabilities to be below their potential realization” (Orosco 73). Students can use this definition to identify how Malcolm, growing up in a time of extreme economic inequality, was indeed restricted from realizing his potential. From an early scene in which a teacher discourages him to be a lawyer and instead pushes him, as a black male, to be a carpenter, to viewing Malcolm’s choices to hustle drugs, and his resulting “status” as a successful dealer, to eventually seeing him land in jail for his illegal actions, students can identify how structural violence, or institutional racism, left Malcolm with no other choices. I imagine students can also easily discuss how they see few
options for themselves today if they grow up in poverty. Students can also analyze the root causes of the physical and verbal violence explored in Malcolm X. Orosco explains that the “inability to ‘get where the other is coming from,’ and the resulting frustrations, can quickly lead to an explosion of hostilities and the kind of brutality that we normally associate with violent acts by one person upon another” (Orosco 73). Their text includes violence inflicted for a variety of causes, from class and gender differences to racial strife, and will be a full source for discussion.

In conclusion, understanding how Chavez was able to see a larger structural cause for the day-to-day symptoms of his community helps us see him as a leader truly concerned about future generations. He understood the multiple elements involved in contributing to a situation and honestly and humbly accepted responsibility for perpetuating any sort of inequality. His ability to analyze a situation through multiple lenses is a good lesson for students to move beyond the initial surface-level read of a text. Lastly, revisiting texts with this lens can also allow students to make connections among texts, questioning trends that they may see across time periods, as certainly is present with the structural and cultural violence found both in Esquivel’s Mexican Revolution-era novel and in the Civil Rights memoir of Malcolm X, half a century later.

Bibliography:


Lesson sequence:

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<th>Activity</th>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Estimated time, materials</th>
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| 1. **Teacher led-discussion**: Use Prezi to introduce the idea of digging deeper to analyze a text | - Show students iceberg graphic, defining lenses and purpose of exercise | - Take notes on definition of lenses and participate in discussion | - 10 minutes  
- Prezi |
| 2. **Class read** of different critical lenses | - Lead students through handout, check for comprehension | - Read along and ask clarification questions | - 20 minutes  
Introduction to lenses handout |
| 3. **In groups**, apply different lenses to selected excerpts from current text (either Malcolm X or TBD) | - Assign groups  
- Model sequence and notetaking | - Read passage aloud in groups, apply to passage  
- Present findings to group | - 40 minutes  
Selected passages from current text |
4. Students write individual critical analysis essays on current text

- Assign as homework or in-class timed write
- Select an appropriate lens to read a text
- Craft a formal essay to show understanding of concept
- 45 minutes
- Essay prompt handout
An Introduction to Critical Lenses
(adapted from the work of Bruce Penniman and from

Readers have the ability to view literature through various critical lenses which enable them to identify and analyze different components of a text or to make meaning from a text in multiple ways. You will have the opportunity to try out these lenses as we study the novel, and in the end, understand that there is more than one correct way to “see” a text.

Options:

1. Psychological Criticism: How is the text shaped by its (intentional or unintentional) representation of the psychological desires, needs, and conflicts of the characters?

   - Investigate the psychology and personality of a character: assume that a character’s nature is revealed by more than external actions.
   - Pay close attention to unconscious motivations and meanings expressed indirectly through dreams, visions, language, and symbols.
   - What traits and symptoms reveal repressed wounds, fears, unresolved conflicts, and guilty desires?

2. Historical Criticism: How does the historical context influence the novel, and what message is the author trying to send about this period of time?

   - Note the time the text was written (different from the setting of the tale!). Who was in charge? What was the political climate or social struggles? Explore how that history influenced the creation of the text and might be reflected in the text.
   - Distinguish between factual and fictional elements of the text, and analyze why the author made this choice.

3. Socioeconomic (Marxist) Criticism: How does the text reflect, reinforce, critique, or question the socioeconomic conditions of its setting (including class struggles, capitalism, or exploitation of one class by another)?

   - Identify the power relationships between the classes and the uses and abuses of capital (assets – anything that has real value).
   - Look at how power (and money) is distributed and used. Who has power, who does not, and what happens as a result? What do you learn about the upper, middle, and lower classes?
   - Evaluate the text to see if it represents a capitalist or Marxist society through its embodiment of ideologies about class and power.
4. **Feminist Criticism:** How is the text shaped by its (intentional or unintentional) representations of patriarchal norms and values and by its embodiment of the ideologies that support or undermine these norms and values?
   - Examine the patterns in the relationships in the text: are there trends in the nature, social roles, and power dynamics of and between female and male characters in relation to their sex and gender identity?
   - Pinpoint stereotypes in portrayals of men and women. Are they reinforced or questioned?
   - Critique any possible heterosexual matrix that organizes identities and cultures in terms of opposition between man and woman.

5. **Cultural Criticism:** How does the text reveal strengths or weaknesses in a culture’s norms, practices, assumptions, or traditions?
   - Observe what elements of the setting, character, or plot seem to be a part of the cultural context of the text. Are they portrayed favorably or unfavorably? Is the author critiquing or praising the culture?
   - How does race, ethnicity, or nationalism play into conflicts or solutions?

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**Classwork/homework when reading a text:** As you read the novel, pick one of the critical lenses from which to read the text. For each chapter, find at least one passage to analyze through your critical lens. Write or type each passage out in its entirety and fully explain its significance in writing. You will receive homework credit for having passages completed on days the reading is due. Your paper assignment will require you to develop a thesis by looking for a commonality among the quotes that you’ve analyzed through your chosen lens.

**In-class/homework essay:** For this writing assignment, you will review your literary lens notes, decide on a compelling idea, narrow your focus, and develop an arguable thesis statement. You will support your thesis idea in a well-developed 750-1000 word essay. You will also focus on establishing subtle and effective organization, writing in a clear, authentic voice, and paying careful attention to detail—editing, proofreading, and adhering to MLA guidelines.

**Narrowing your topic—an example of literary analysis:**
   - Use of literary devices in *The Great Gatsby*
     - Color imagery in the novel
       - Images of the color blue
         - The use of images of the color blue to develop the thematic idea of hopeless longing in the novel