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Post-Colonial Criticism (1990s-present)

Summary:

This resource will help you begin the process of understanding literary theory and schools of criticism and how they are used in the academy.

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History is Written by the Victors

Post-colonial criticism is similar to cultural studies, but it assumes a unique perspective on literature and politics that warrants a separate discussion. Specifically, post-colonial critics are concerned with literature produced by colonial powers and works produced by those who were/are colonized. Post-colonial theory looks at issues of power, economics, politics, religion, and culture and how these elements work in relation to colonial hegemony (Western colonizers controlling the colonized).

Therefore, a post-colonial critic might be interested in works such as Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* where colonial "...ideology [is] manifest in Crusoe's colonialist attitude toward the land upon which he's shipwrecked and toward the black man he 'colonizes' and names Friday" (Tyson 377). In addition, post-colonial theory might point out that "...despite Heart of Darkness's (Joseph Conrad) obvious anti-colonial agenda, the novel points to the colonized population as the standard of savagery to which Europeans are contrasted" (Tyson 375). Post-colonial criticism also takes the form of literature composed by authors that critique Euro-centric hegemony.

A Unique Perspective on Empire

Seminal post-colonial writers such as Nigerian author Chinua Achebe and Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong'o have written a number of stories recounting the suffering of colonized people. For example, in *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe details the strife and devastation that occurred when British colonists began moving inland from the Nigerian coast.

Rather than glorifying the exploratory nature of European colonists as they expanded their sphere of influence, Achebe narrates the destructive events that led to the death and enslavement of thousands of Nigerians when the British imposed their Imperial government. In turn, Achebe points out the negative effects (and shifting ideas of identity and culture) caused by the imposition of Western religion and economics on Nigerians during colonial rule.

Power, Hegemony, and Literature

Post-colonial criticism also questions the role of the Western literary canon and Western history as dominant forms of knowledge making. The terms "First World," "Second World," "Third World" and "Fourth World" nations are critiqued by post-colonial

critics because they reinforce the dominant positions of Western cultures populating First World status. This critique includes the literary canon and histories written from the perspective of First World cultures. So, for example, a post-colonial critic might question the works included in "the canon" because the canon does not contain works by authors outside Western culture.

Moreover, the authors included in the canon often reinforce colonial hegemonic ideology, such as Joseph Conrad. Western critics might consider *Heart of Darkness* an effective critique of colonial behavior. But post-colonial theorists and authors might disagree with this perspective: "...as Chinua Achebe observes, the novel's condemnation of European is based on a definition of Africans as savages: beneath their veneer of civilization, the Europeans are, the novel tells us, as barbaric as the Africans. And indeed, Achebe notes, the novel portrays Africans as a pre-historic mass of frenzied, howling, incomprehensible barbarians..." (Tyson 374-375).

Typical questions:

- How does the literary text, explicitly or allegorically, represent various aspects of colonial oppression?
- What does the text reveal about the problematics of post-colonial identity, including the relationship between personal and cultural identity and such issues as double consciousness and hybridity?
- What person(s) or groups does the work identify as "other" or stranger? How are such persons/groups described and treated?
- What does the text reveal about the politics and/or psychology of anti-colonialist resistance?
- What does the text reveal about the operations of cultural difference - the ways in which race, religion, class, gender, sexual orientation, cultural beliefs, and customs combine to form individual identity - in shaping our perceptions of ourselves, others, and the world in which we live?
- How does the text respond to or comment upon the characters, themes, or assumptions of a canonized (colonialist) work?
- Are there meaningful similarities among the literatures of different post-colonial populations?
- How does a literary text in the Western canon reinforce or undermine colonialist ideology through its representation of colonialization and/or its inappropriate silence about colonized peoples? (Tyson 378-379)

Here is a list of scholars we encourage you to explore to further your understanding of this theory:

Criticism

- Edward Said - *Orientalism*, 1978; *Culture and Imperialism*, 1994
- Kamau Brathwaite - *The History of the Voice*, 1979
- Gayatri Spivak - *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, 1987
- Dominick LaCapra - *The Bounds of Race: Perspectives on Hegemony and Resistance*, 1991
- Homi Bhabha - *The Location of Culture*, 1994

Literature and non-fiction

- Chinua Achebe - *Things Fall Apart*, 1958
- Ngugi wa Thiong'o - *The River Between*, 1965
- Sembene Ousmane - *God's Bits of Wood*, 1962
- Ruth Praver Jhabvala - *Heat and Dust*, 1975
- Buchi Emecheta - *The Joys of Motherhood*, 1979
- Keri Hulme - *The Bone People*, 1983

- Robertson Davies - *What's Bred in the Bone*, 1985
 - Kazuo Ishiguro - *The Remains of the Day*, 1988
 - Bharati Mukherjee - *Jasmine*, 1989
 - Jill Ker Conway - *The Road from Coorain*, 1989
 - Helena Norberg-Hodge - *Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh*, 1991
 - Michael Ondaatje - *The English Patient*, 1992
 - Gita Mehta - *A River Sutra*, 1993
 - Arundhati Roy - *The God of Small Things*, 1997
 - Patrick Chamboiseau - *Texaco*, 1997
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