Lesbian, Gay, and Queer Criticism
Tyson, Lois: Critical Theory Today: A User Friendly Guide

Chapter 10
(322-341)

Lesbian Criticism

• Lesbian criticism is concerned with issues of personal identity and politics analogous to those analyzed by feminists (see chapter 4). However, while feminism addresses issues related to sexism and the difficulties involved in carving out a space for personal identity and political action beyond the influence of sexist ideologies, lesbian critics address issues related to both sexism and heterosexism. In other words, lesbian critics must deal with the psychological, social, economic, and political oppression fostered not only by patriarchal male privilege, but by heterosexual privilege as well. (Tyson 322-23)

Gay Criticism

• The kinds of analyses that tend to engage the attention of gay critics often fall under the heading of gay sensibility. How does being gay influence the way one sees the world, sees oneself and others, creates and responds to art and music, creates and interprets literature, or experiences and expresses emotion? In a heterosexual culture such as the one we inhabit at the turn of the twenty-first century in America, gay sensibility includes an awareness of being different, at least in certain ways, from the members of the mainstream, dominant culture, and the complex feelings that result from an implicit, ongoing social oppression. In other words, part of seeing the world as a gay man includes the ways in which one deals with being oppressed as a gay man. Among others, three important domains of gay sensibility, all of which involve responses to heterosexist oppression, are drag, camp, and dealing with the issue of AIDS. (Tyson 330)

Queer Theory

• For queer theory, categories of sexuality cannot be defined by such simple oppositions as homosexual/heterosexual. Building on deconstruction’s insights into human subjectivity (selfhood) as a fluid, fragmented, dynamic collectivity of possible “selves,” queer theory defines individual sexuality as a fluid, fragmented, dynamic collectivity of possible sexualities. Our sexuality may be different at different times over the course of our lives or even at different times over the course of a week because sexuality is a dynamic range of desire. Gay sexuality, lesbian sexuality, bisexuality, and heterosexuality are, for all of us, possibilities along a continuum of sexual possibilities. And what these categories mean to different individuals will be influenced by how they conceive their own racial and class identities as well. Thus, sexuality is completely controlled neither by our biological sex (male or female) nor by the way our culture translates biological sex into gender roles (masculine or feminine). Sexuality exceeds these definitions and has a will, a creativity, an expressive need of its own. (Tyson 335)

• Finally, lesbian, gay, and queer criticism often rely on similar kinds of textual evidence. For example, in addition to the more obvious forms of textual cues—such as homoerotic imagery and erotic encounters between same-sex characters—there are
rather subtle textual cues that can create a homoerotic atmosphere even in an otherwise heterosexual text, as we saw in the examples of lesbian, gay, and queer criticism provided earlier. No single textual cue can stand on its own as evidence of a homoerotic atmosphere in a text. Nor can a small number of such cues support a lesbian, gay, or queer reading. But a preponderance of these cues, especially if coupled with other kinds of textual or biographical evidence, can strengthen a lesbian, gay, or queer interpretation even of an apparently heterosexual text. (Tyson 339)

Typical questions:
1. What are the politics (ideological agendas) of specific gay, lesbian, or queer works, and how are those politics revealed in...the work's thematic content or portrayals of its characters?
2. What are the poetics (literary devices and strategies) of a specific lesbian, gay, or queer works?
3. What does the work contribute to our knowledge of queer, gay, or lesbian experience and history, including literary history?
4. How is queer, gay, or lesbian experience coded in texts that are by writers who are apparently homosexual?
5. How might the works of heterosexual writers be reread to reveal an unspoken or unconscious lesbian, gay or queer presence? That is, does the work have an unconscious lesbian, gay or queer desire or conflict that it submerges?
6. What does the work reveal about the operations (socially, politically, psychologically) of heterosexism?
7. How does the literary text illustrate the problematics of sexuality and sexual "identity," that is the ways in which human sexuality does not fall neatly into the separate categories defined by the words homosexual and heterosexual?
8. What elements in the text exist in the middle, between the perceived masculine/feminine binary? In other words, what elements exhibit traits of both (bisexual)?
9. What elements of the text can be perceived as being masculine (active, powerful) and feminine (passive, marginalized) and how do the characters support these traditional roles?
10. What sort of support (if any) is given to elements or characters who question the masculine/feminine binary? What happens to those elements/characters?