

Questions for Interpretive Strategies: use the following sets of questions to jump-start your thinking about *The Magic Toyshop*. These are not outlines for an essay; rather, they're prompts to generate ideas. Return to the details of the text early and often! I'll expect you to back up your assertions about the text with frequent references to textual evidence!

Feminism/Gender Theory:

- Is the protagonist of the text male or female? Are we invited to identify with that protagonist?
- How important is the sex of the protagonist to the text as a whole? If the sex of the protagonist were to change, would the text be changed significantly?
- What types of roles do women have in the text? To what extent are these roles portrayed as "natural" or "normal," and to what extent does the text question the inevitability of these roles?
- How is power distributed among the characters in relation to their various sexual identities?
- 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?
- What sort of support (if any) is given to elements or characters who question the masculine/feminine binary? What happens to those elements/characters?

Postcolonialism/Cultural Materialism:

- When was the text written? What historical norms does the work seem to reinforce? How do those norms differ from my own?
- What are the discourses that inform the text? How do those discourses construct a particular reality? How does that reality differ from my own—that is, how has the discourse changed over time?
- What cultures are represented in the text? What are their respective world views? What does each value? What does each reject?
- What happens in the text when cultures clash and when one sees itself as superior to the other?
- How does the privileged culture's superior status affect that of the colonized culture?
- How do members of the colonized culture view themselves and their culture?

Queer Theory:

- What elements in the text undermine the perceived masculine/feminine binary?
- What elements in the text undermine the male/female distinction (as well as other attendant binary oppositions implicit in the male/female binary)?
- How does the text show gender identity to be performative*—that is, something that feels "natural" but is rather socially constructed and only learned through repetition (repetitions that inevitably fall short of perceived gender ideals)?
- What does the work reveal about the enforcement of heterosexuality and the suppression of same-sex desire?
- How does the text delineate boundaries between homosocial bonds and homosexual desire?

- How does the text illustrate the problematics of sexuality and sexual "identity"—that is, the ways in which human gender, sex, sexuality and sexual identities refuse to fall neatly into the separate categories defined by the words homosexual and heterosexual, male and female, masculine and feminine?

Adapted from Robert Dale Parker: *How to Interpret Literature* (Oxford UP, 2008); Charles Bressler: *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice* (Prentice Hall, 2003)

*The notion of "performativity" is from Judith Butler; by this term she does *not* intend to suggest that gender identity is something we consciously choose (analogous to, say, deciding what to wear on any given day); rather, she's drawing on J.L. Austin's speech-act theory.