

Polishing your interpretive lenses: use the following sets of questions to jump-start your thinking about *The Magic Toyshop*. These aren't outlines for an essay; rather, they're prompts to help you generate ideas. (But even as prompts, they're hardly exhaustive. I also recommend reviewing the introductory essays about Feminist and Gender Criticism, Postcolonial Criticism, and Queer Theory in our edition of *Heart of Darkness*, for starters—as well as the “Queer Theory” resources on Day 20 of the Updates page.) Remember: return to the novel early and often! I'll expect you to back up your assertions about the text with frequent references to specific textual evidence!

Feminist/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 various characters support or contest 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?

Postcolonial Criticism (and New Historicism/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 ideologies or discourses circulate in this text? How are those ideologies or discourses linked to structures of *power*? In what ways, if any, are those ideologies or structures of power contested or critiqued?
- What cultures are represented in the text? How and by whom? Do subaltern persons or groups represent themselves and their culture in this text, or are they deprived of the power of self-representation?
- What happens in the text when cultures clash, when one enforces its will or its sense of superior over another other, or when one resists subjugation?

Queer Theory:

- How does the text show gender identity to be performative*—that is, something that feels “natural” but is rather socially constructed and learned through repetition (repetitions that inevitably fall short of perceived gender ideals)?
- What does the work reveal about the enforcement of heterosexuality and heterosexual 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 identity refuse to fall neatly into the

categories defined by words like homosexual and heterosexual, male and female, masculine and feminine?

- What elements in the text challenge or undermine such binaries as masculine/feminine, homosexual/heterosexual, and/or other assumptions and fixed ideas about gender identity, “normal” sexual practices, and so on?

Adapted in part from Robert Dale Parker: *How to Interpret Literature* (Oxford UP, 2008) and 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.