

Name _____

Literature with Kristin and Trevor

Historical/Biographical Theory

WHAT IS HISTORICAL / BIOGRAPHICAL THEORY?

A biography is the story of a person's life. Biographies fulfill our human need to understand one another, explaining why and how an individual did certain things and helping us to understand the person's motivation and purpose. We can "walk in their shoes" for awhile, momentarily catching a glimpse of their perspective of the world and developing a certain amount of sympathy for their individual circumstances.

Knowing the biographical details of an author's life helps the reader to understand the author's purpose in writing a story, novel, or poem. In fact, many biographical critics believe that the only way to fully understand the work itself is to understand the person who wrote it. The meaning readers understand, then, should be the author's intended meaning. It is also easier to understand an author's message if you have developed some sympathy for the author.

- Who is he or she?
- Why did he or she feel it was important to communicate to us?
- Have the author's life events contributed to the novel, story, or poem and the message communicated through the work?

How do you know what the author intended, even if the author lived a long time ago? Through research, finding out everything you can about an author's life, language, and personal beliefs and learning to recognize the author's voice speaking to you through the events and characters in a story. When you know about the author and can "hear" the author's voice, then the author's message to you is clearer, and you can find the meaning of a story, novel, or poem.

STEP 1: Biography of Langston Hughes

Read the biography of Hughes. As you read, highlight some significant aspects of his life. After reading, answer the following questions in your WNB:

1. What are five significant aspects of Hughes's life and identity that might contribute to how and what he writes?
2. In your group, brainstorm some of the significant political, social, and cultural events that happened during Hughes's life. Based on your knowledge of history, what significant political, social, and cultural events had a possible influence on Hughes's writing?

STEP 2: Hughes's Poetry

Read the four short poems included at the end of biography. Describe some of the main themes that emerge from Hughes's poems. What can these poems and themes tell us about Langston Hughes's life experiences and influences?

STEP 3: Langston Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance

Watch the YouTube video documentary about Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance. While watching, add to your list of significant life experiences and influences that may have had an impact on Hughes's writing.

STEP 4: "Passing"

Read the short story "Passing." Based on what you have learned about the life of Langston Hughes and the world that he lived in, write a ¾ to 1 page analysis using the Historical/Biographical lens. Remember to focus on the questions in the WHAT IS HISTORICAL / BIOGRAPHICAL THEORY? section above.