Cultural Criticism

Cultural Criticism is another critical lens through which any text can be viewed. This form of criticism examines how different religions, ethnicities, class identifications, political beliefs, and views affect the ways in which texts are created and interpreted. Cultural Criticism suggests that being a part of—or excluded from—a specific group or culture contributes to and affects our understanding of texts.

The following statements reflect four common assumptions in the use of Cultural Criticism as a lens for understanding literature.

1. Ethnicity, religious beliefs, social class, and so on are crucial components in formulating plausible interpretations of text.

2. While the emphasis is on diversity of approach and subject matter, Cultural Criticism is not the only means of understanding ourselves and our art.

3. An examination or exploration of the relationship between dominant cultures and the dominated is essential.

4. When looking at a text through the perspective of marginalized peoples, new understandings emerge.

Since Cultural Criticism examines texts from the position of those individuals who are in some way marginalized or not part of the dominant culture, studying the following poem by Luis Rodriguez will provide insights on this perspective.
Poetry

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
An award-winning poet, journalist, and critic, Luis J. Rodriguez was born on the U.S./Mexico border, but grew up in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles. As a youth, he joined a gang to gain a sense of belonging and protection, but he found salvation in the Chicano movement and in literature. In prose works like Always Running: La Vida Loca, Gang Days in L.A., and poetry collections like The Concrete River, Rodriguez deals with the struggle to survive in a chaotic urban setting.

SPEAKING WITH HANDS

by Luis Rodriguez

There were no markets in Watts.
There were these small corner stores
we called marketas
who charged more money
for cheaper goods than what existed
in other parts of town.

The owners were often thieves in white coats
who talked to you like animals,
who knew you had no options;
who knew Watts was the preferred landfill
of the city.
One time, Mama started an argument at the cash register. In her broken English, speaking with her hands, she had us children stand around her as she fought with the grocer on prices & quality & dignity.

Mama became a woman swept by a sobering madness; she must have been what Moses saw in the burning bush, a pillar of fire consuming the still air that reeked of overripe fruit and bad meat from the frozen food section.

She refused to leave until the owner called the police. The police came and argued too, but Mama wouldn’t stop. They pulled her into the parking lot, called her crazy… and then Mama showed them crazy!

They didn’t know what to do but let her go, and Mama took us children back toward home, tired of being tired.

Quickwrite: Use the elements listed as part of the definition of Cultural Criticism to write about how this lens or perspective might help you interpret this text.