The Other

The Other is an individual who is perceived by the group as not belonging, as being different in some fundamental way. Any stranger becomes the Other. The group sees itself as the norm and judges those who do not meet that norm (that is, who are different in any way) as the Other. Perceived as lacking essential characteristics possessed by the group, the Other is almost always seen as a lesser or inferior being and is treated accordingly. The Other in a society may have few or no legal rights, may be characterized as less intelligent or as immoral, and may even be regarded as sub-human.

Otherness takes many forms. The Other may be someone who is of...

- a different race (White vs. non-White),
- a different nationality (Anglo Saxon vs. Italian),
- a different religion (Protestant vs. Catholic or Christian vs. Jew),
- a different social class (aristocrat vs. serf),
- a different political ideology (capitalism vs. communism),
- a different sexual orientation (heterosexual vs. homosexual),
- a different origin (native born vs. immigrant).

The Other is not necessarily a numerical minority. In a country defeated by an imperial power, the far more numerous natives become the Other, for example, the British rule in India where Indians outnumbered the British 4,000 to 1. Similarly, women are defined and judged by men, the dominant group, in relationship to themselves, so that they become the Other. Hence Aristotle says: "The female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities; we should regard the female nature as afflicted with a natural defectiveness."

The group which is defining the Other may be an entire society, a social class or a community within a society, a family, or even a high school clique or a neighborhood gang.
The Other and the Outsider

The outsider frequently overlaps with the Other, but they are not identical. The outsider has the possibility of being accepted by and incorporated into the group; offspring are very likely to be accepted into the group. The Other, however, is perceived as different in kind, as lacking in some essential trait or traits that the group has; offspring will inherit the same deficient nature and be the Other also. Therefore the Other and the offspring of the Other may be doomed forever to remain separate, never to become part of the group—in other words, to be the Other forever.

The Other in Literature

The Other is a common figure in literature. If you took Core Curriculum 1.1, you may recognize this concept in a tragedy like Medea. Medea as Other is doubly dangerous. For the Greeks, any non-Greek was the Other or a "barbarian," and Medea is a barbarian. She is also the Other in being female; woman, as Other, is often perceived as inherently dangerous. Medea justifies these views of the Other in the terrible vengeance she wreaks on Jason because he betrayed her and abandoned her and their sons.

Do you see any relevance of this concept of the Other to the works we are reading in this course?

- Is Hedda Gabler the Other in any way—as a woman with unacceptable aspirations or passions for her time and class?
- Is Jane Eyre the Other in any way—in social class, in her values and goals, or in her nature? Consider her in the Reed household, at the Lowood School, in her position as governess, in her relationship with Rochester or with Blanche Ingram. If she is the Other, does she remain the Other or is she able to overcome her separate or inferior status and find acceptance?
- There is no question that the Blacks in The Bluest Eye are presented as the Other in society and that they perceive themselves as Other. In what ways is their Otherness manifested? How are the children taught to be the Other? What consequences do the blacks in this novel suffer because they are the Other?
- Similarly the Chinese mothers in The Joy Luck Club are presented as the Other in American society; are any of them the Other in Chinese society? Otherness also functions in the family relationships. The Chinese mothers perceive themselves as Other from their daughters, and their American-born daughters perceive themselves as Other from their mothers. In what ways is their Otherness manifested? How are the children taught to be the Other? How do
the mothers become the Other to their children? What consequences do the mothers and daughters suffer because they are the Other?