

Heart of Darkness, Don Quixote and Theory Our Exploration of the Process of Exploration Continues

Introduction:

Over the course of our first discussion of theory we got a taste of what critical theory can be used to do. At the same time it became apparent that some folks had a somewhat limited understanding of the nature of theory in this context and how we can apply it. For instance in one or two cases the understanding seemed to be that critical theory is a bit like math in that there is a single, fairly narrow, way that a given theory—psychoanalytic theory for instance—works and that it can only be applied to a text in a similarly singular, narrow manner. This misunderstanding makes sense in some respects: when we see the word “theory,” we’re most familiar with it in the context of math or science, and so think that all theories have the same sort of you-apply-it-this-way-and-get-this-answer feel to them. The problem with this understanding is that it is pretty limited both in terms of the nature of the way that “theory” works in our context, and also in terms of the way that it can be used.

As I pointed out in a couple of places during my discussion of theory—mostly when I added my two cents to the discussion of Marxist and psychoanalytic theory, the whole idea of “a theory” is a lot more unstable for us, often because of the way that we’re trying to make sense of narratives; and in order to do so, we either work with or assume another “meta-narrative”—some larger story that can be used to account for the narrative. Think Freud and his idea of the Oedipal complex. But, as I attempted to show during my discussion of psychoanalytic theory, this meta-narrative is itself a story, a tentative text that we have come up with to try and make sense of, and account for what is going on in the literary texts we’re working with. As such the overarching back story, the analyst’s narrative, is open to analysis. I pointed this out in my discussion of psychoanalytic theory, particularly in the context of those feminist psychoanalytic critics (like Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Hélène Cixous) who used the core techniques of psychoanalytic theory to analyze the instabilities and anxieties inherent in some of the earlier narratives that emerged as part of psychoanalytic theory. Because we’re looking at the way that texts—all texts—work, and because literary theory is itself a text, it (literary theory) is a somewhat unstable beast, one that can develop and evolve. We can say that “theory as a practice” involves a core process of examining and identifying how some central myths both emerge and are undone as a result of our storytelling processes. But at the same time, narratives—all narratives (including the narratives implicit in theory itself)—seem to be in the process of instantiating or positioning or reinforcing some core power dynamic that, when we look at them more closely we can see as arbitrary, ephemeral, and often self-serving in what Freud argued was a sort of rudimentary, often infantile, primal manner.

At the same time another problem here has to do with the “scene” of analysis. Some folks seemed to think that, again, like math, a theory can be applied to identify a singular, definitive read of a text. Again this is a problem as some of the theories that we have examined start to point out that there are some inherent problems even with reading in that texts are so “multi-valent” and unstable at times that there can only ever be “readings”, i.e., not a single, definitive read. And then what do we apply theory to? A single episode in a text (as we did in our last discussion)? The text as a whole? The writer’s life? The larger history that this text is a part of, but perhaps also struggling with? Who’s to say what the locus or the center of the analysis should include?

Suffice it to say then that where theory gets applied, and what that application includes, can be a complex business. Which is not to say that the project of using and applying theory can't be done, but that we should try more, present our findings to one another, and see what some of the great minds in this class can come up with. In doing so we'll see applications that work in that they help us see what's going on in a text, or in that text's relationship to some larger project. And then some other applications that won't work out so well.

Before getting started though, let's also limit what we are comparing and trying to make sense of in each other's work, so that we're at least looking at ideas that are comparable—an "apples with apples" thing, i.e. not apples and oranges. To do so I'll remind you of a quote that we started the year with, and that raises an idea that is pretty central to the whole problem of any sort of narrative analysis, i.e. that "The answers you get from literature depend on the questions you pose" (Atwood). Which is to say that we could examine a lot of different elements of our texts (a lot of different questions, lots of different types of fruit to bring this back to the "apples and oranges" thing) but to keep things more manageable and comparable, we should focus on one concern or consideration. You may recall that at the beginning of class, I outlined how I wanted to centre this course around the idea of a journey or exploration, and in so doing acquire some tools to help us consider our own little trek down life's little highway. I suggested this focus mechanism because it may help you think a little better about where you are going, what you want to do—your own narrative. At the same time this mechanism is useful in that it provides us with a common theme, so that we're all dealing with apples (when this part is read out during class, I'll give you a thirty second break at this point so that you can make the usual assortment of jokes about my past life/"fixation" with apples). Now let's get going.

Assignment:

Presentation/Discussion Portion

You will work with a partner of your choosing. Together you will identify an episode or chapter from *Don Quixote* (preferably one that neither of you addressed during your last presentation...but I can be flexible here if there is a compelling reason to do so) and one part of *Heart of Darkness*. Using whichever critical tool or tools you think appropriate, identify and explain one fundamental shift or development that has occurred in the nature of the exploration/journey undertaken in each work. To do so you will need to identify and outline some element central to the journey apparent in *Quixote*, and then explain how this element has changed/appears differently in *Darkness*. I'm hoping for presentations that run 7-10 minutes (some flexibility possible here). Of course there should be ample evidence that both partners have contributed equally to this presentation.

Written Portion

We will ultimately provide a review of a couple of these presentations outlining and explaining which ideas were most effective, where there were problems etc. More details will be provided when we begin assembling this discussion. For the meantime though, it will be important for you to attend to the presentations and keep notes about the ideas developed so that you will be able to provide a thoughtful discussion that refers to specifics of the presentation discussed.