

Critical Theory

The answers you get from literature depend on the questions you pose.

Margaret Atwood

First off a bit of an apology for those of you who were with me last year: yes you have seen the quote above before...and some of the material that you're about to see below. I'm providing this material again as this material is pretty central to my understanding of the core process used in making sense of texts. This understanding doesn't change much from year to year and I need to explain this material to those folks who haven't seen it before. What will change here is that instead of starting with some fairly basic tools to help make sense of texts, we'll begin to explore the assortment of more sophisticated critical tools that are part of the more academic (professional?) process of making sense of texts. Hopefully there's enough new stuff to make those of you who have seen this before worthwhile, and thanks for your patience otherwise.

Big Question:

How does the way that something is written—choices like those elements generally collected together and described as style, and then the point of view used to communicate what is being said—affect what is said in literary work? This may seem like a minor question to you, but as you can hopefully begin to sense from “Tense Present” these questions are at the center of what goes on in the study of Literature. In order to begin to answer this larger question in the context of a specific text we will need to:

1. Describe the texts we will be discussing (plot, character, setting) (hopefully a straight-forward task)
2. Attend to and then describe stylistic details (identify how writers describe their subject, what is included and excluded, what mechanisms are used to describe the content of a story), and also details like the point of view used to tell a story
3. Make sense of and explain the way that texts address their subject.

Core thinking, reading, writing and presentation goals that we'll develop during this discussion include:

1. Identifying some of the major theoretical tools (schools) used to make sense of texts. This will be just scratching the surface but for us “scratching the surface” is plenty as this is the stuff of entire academic careers: we need to be realistic about what we can and should get done.
2. Begin to use some of these tools to make sense of texts (same qualification as above, i.e. this will be a start, but a start will be lots given who we are and the stage we're at. Continue to develop our ability to summarize—i.e. describe and explain.

To begin this process lets first sort out how the idea of theory fits into the whole project of studying how texts work.

Introduction:

In previous English classes you have learned that it is possible to describe and make sense of narrative texts (stories) using some fundamental descriptive terminology: setting, characters and plot. At the same time you've probably spent some time examining works in terms of the "themes" addressed in those works. What you may not have discussed—one of the key ideas that we'll begin taking up here—is that there is a fundamental difference between the first three of these terms—setting, characters and plot—and the last of these: theme. While there are, of course, differences in the way that we can describe a story's plot, characters and setting, the definition of these terms remains relatively stable and points to something in a story that doesn't change much: a story's setting is the location or series of locations where the story takes place; the characters are the actors—the players—in the story; and the plot is the sequence of events that occur in the story. Plots can appear in a non-chronological manner, but the plot is still the plot, the events that, when described together, respond to the question "what happened?" in a literary work.

The term "literary theme" though, is quite different. To begin to outline this difference we should start with a definition. As we do so, as we start to define "theme," or look at definitions that are out there, it becomes apparent right away that the idea of a "theme" is quite different relative to setting, character, and plot as even the definition seems to be a fairly slippery beast that can change dramatically from source to source. Many definitions say something about a "main idea" or "important idea" that is addressed in a literary work...an idea that seems simple enough until we start finding out that works can have several different themes, and that the "main theme" of any given work can shift rather dramatically depending on who's talking about that work. So is the definition at fault, is the definition too broad?

When you start to look at definitions more closely, particularly when those who are trying to deal with the idea of a "main theme" try to peg down this term more closely, things get messy to the point where, for instance, the introductory discussion of "theme (narrative)" that appears in Wikipedia points out quite realistically and honestly that

While the term "theme" was for a period used to reference "message" or "moral", literary critics now rarely employ it in this fashion,[mostly because of] the confusion it causes regarding the common denotation of theme: "[t]he subject of discourse, discussion, conversation, meditation, or composition; a topic." One historic problem with the previous usage was that readers would frequently conflate "subject" and "theme" as similar concepts, a confusion that the new terminology helps prevent in both scholarship and the classroom. Thus, according to recent scholarship ...identifying a story's theme—for example, "death"—does not inherently involve identifying the story's thesis or claims about "death's" definitions, properties, values, or significance. Like morals or messages, themes often explore historically common or cross-culturally recognizable ideas and are almost always implied rather than stated explicitly.

([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theme_\(literature\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theme_(literature))), September 19, 2012)

As this attempt at a definition shows, there is a problem in that the idea of “a theme” seems to include shifts around: away from the discussion of a “message” or “moral” to the discussion of something that is somehow “implied rather than stated explicitly.” In this definition, the way we are to determine what “the subject of discourse, discussion, conversation...” includes is never really made clear and as discussions of many literary works have shown, is often complicated by the fact that even in very short works, there can be a lot going on...and how do you reduce the complexity of the interactions in a work to “a [single] subject or theme”? So this idea of “a” theme is a bit of a problem.

At the same time there’s another problem here that needs to be taken into account, one that becomes apparent if we consider the Margaret Atwood quote found at the top of this discussion (which has also been attributed to the scholar Hanna Arendt) : i.e. if “The answers you get from literature *depends on the questions you pose.*” as Atwood points out, then what something is “about” (particularly if it is something that is “implied rather than stated explicitly”) will almost necessarily depend, in part, on what we ask of that text, or what we are examining in that text. To use one of the works that we’ll begin with in class, and two themes that might be pinned to this text, is *Don Quixote* an extended metaphor representing the oppression of the Spanish Inquisition? Or is it about class struggle (because of the relationship between Don Quixote and Sancho Panza)? Quixote could even be seen as metaphor for our relationship to reality itself, with the way that Don Q. has these crazy ideas that keep running up against the hard, cold reality of windmills bonking him on the head. What the story seems to be “about” really depend, as much the way we look at the text, as it does on what’s included in the story.

A critical reading of a text is not just what’s going on the text (this is part of the equation) but also what we’re looking for in the text/wondering about it. Thus for instance we can examine two different texts and what each has to say about success and/or failure (one of the central ideas we’ll take up in class). Failure may not be the “main theme” in a work¹ but we can examine how failure appears in that work if it is a reasonably significant part of that story, or if we can see the story as showing us something about failure. To use the language of the “common or cross-culturally recognizable ideas” (from the Wikipedia entry shown above) as long as failure is an *element that we could use to consider this text and what it has to show us, it—failure—can be used as a* filtering mechanism, or lens that we can use to focus our discussion. Themes are recognizable ideas that we could use to think about different works. Texts are texts, complex interactions of words and ideas that are often difficult to describe as being about one thing, but that doesn’t mean we can’t decide what we want to examine in a text: the text is there, we have things we’d like to examine texts for so why not?.

You may be wondering “Why this approach?” Why consider what a work says or shows in terms of only one semi-predetermined thematic consideration? It’s worth noting that, as a “for instance”, this general approach has driven what is usually described as “feminist literary criticism”—a movement that has, over the last fifty to sixty years, had an enormous influence on the way that

¹ I’ll be honest and say that I’m not really sure what a “main theme” is given what Atwood has said, and what I have argued here. I agree with her and think that “theme” is a function not just of the work, but of the interaction between reader or reading group—and by extension the interests of that individual or group—and that work.

western civilization has changed in terms of what we think about women and gender, the stories we tell each other, and how we act. To oversimplify a bit (but not too much) this movement started looking at the way that gender is “constructed” in literature (what we tell ourselves about gender in stories) and pointed out that as we told stories about women’s role in society (about work for instance) they tended to become self-fulfilling prophecies, and some pretty negative prophecies in some cases. As a result of this critical thinking, that group of folks usually covered by the label “western civilization” has changed the way that it thinks and acts fairly dramatically where gender roles are concerned.

So we can, and will examine the short works we look at in terms of some “thematic concerns” — some things that we might be wondering about in terms of what these stories have to say about that theme, and then how the way that the story addresses that theme affects what is said.

Themes we might consider:

- Success/Failure, (big one...big fear for some folks in high school)
- The struggle for power, (likewise)
- Relationships to the environment.
- ...and whatever other “biggies” that you’d like to explore.

Okay so we’ve pegged down the way that we’ll help clarify what we write by focusing our topic. But what about methodology? The way that we think about texts? In the world of science, different groups use different tools to consider the specific problems that they address: chemists and physicists may work together but tend to have different tools to make sense of things. This specialization tends to take place because the individuals involved can’t know everything and for a lot of these folks it’s the work of a lifetime to develop an understanding of, and then the ability to use one set of tools. But is there something comparable to the scientific community’s specialization of disciplines for literary scholars?

There are different critical tools that can be used to make sense of texts. At times there have been (still are in fact) tensions between these different groups (many components of the whole “lit crit” process tend to have a political element to them and, historically, there have been some struggles between, among other groupings, different critical schools). More recently though, scholars tend to see different approaches as just providing different approaches that can often be used together to help make sense of a text, much as for instance, chemists and physicists may work together to develop their understanding of a problem.

So what’s out there in terms of these “tools”?

There are several approaches that are used sometimes separately, and sometimes together. Sometimes the restrictions in the way that different approaches are being used have to do with the same sort of problems that show up in the science example I’ve been using: some of these theoretical tools and approaches can be fairly complex so folks tend to specialize. At the same time though, these tools will often be used together by different scholars as needed. And in order to begin developing our skills as literary scholars, we should get a sense of at least some of the approaches that are out there and how they work. Toward that end....

Assignment Overview

Part 1:

You will become part of a partnership. You and your partners will be responsible for describing and then illustrating one critical approach using the introduction to critical theory that is attached here as well as the readings I will provide to you and your group (we'll be "expert groups" in this respect, although, of course, the idea of an "expert" here is relative: relative to others in the class you and your group will be the experts on your topic; relative to others out there in the big bad world that are using these tools.)

You will then develop a presentation for the rest of the class in which you outline the core ideas behind the theoretical approach you have been given to discuss, and then illustrate how your approach works using, as an example, a discussion of one of the considerations outlined above, using the critical approach you are discussing.

Part 2:

The class will, as always during the presentation portion of our assignment cycle, take notes and keeping track of the critical approaches that are discussed. We will then write our first in-class comparative discussion addressing one of the presentations developed in class (I usually provide a choice of two or three presentations for you to work with). In preparation for this portion of the assignment I will, as always, show you how I develop a comparable piece of work myself.

In Detail

Part 1

To begin we will establish partnerships. Your first job as a partnership will be to determine which approach you would like to address (one group per approach only).

Developing your partnership's portion of the discussion

1. Start by outlining the history of your approach: where and when it came from. Then provide an overview of the basic strategies included in your approach. I'll provide a sample discussion of my own.
2. Having outlined the history of your strategy, go on to provide an explanation/synopsis of the school of thought your group is discussing. One thing that I found particularly productive about the "OWL" reading (attached) is the way that this particular outline showed the sorts of questions that a particular approach tends to answer. It would be good to use these as a focus method in outlining how your approach works, but then go on to expand/illustrate using an example. When illustrating/explaining we'll use as examples (because we have them in common, either as examples (because we have them in common, either *Babar* or the first part of *Don Quixote*.

Part 2

Take lots of notes about each presentation: Keep track of the specifics that each group discusses and then what they have to say about these specifics. You will be using this material to assemble your first in-class comparative discussion and will need this material. Your discussion **will not be about your own presentation materials.**