Critical readings: 3 little pigs

What do people mean when they talk about critical theories? How useful are they when it comes to interpreting texts? Tina Davidson takes you on a lightning tour of literary positions, before putting them into practice on a familiar text.

At the start of Rita's learning process in Willy Russell's play, Educating Rita, she is told by Frank, her tutor, that literary criticism 'should be approached almost as a science. It must be supported by reference to established literary critique'. When Rita dismisses E.M. Forster'sHoward's End as 'crap', Frank presses her to illuminate her views by reference to a literary critic: 'Crap? And who are you citing in support of your thesis, F.R. Leavis?' Rita struggles to support her conclusions, but is told that she 'cannot interpret E.M. Forster from a Marxist viewpoint', a comment which leaves her feeling totally confused. With numerous critical theories providing a range of approaches to texts, and with some conflicts of interpretation even within the same school of thought, it can be a daunting task to steer a clear course through potentially bewildering opinions, in order to arrive at a personal but 'informed' interpretation. And, like Rita, how is one to know which approaches are valid and fruitful and which are subjective or even spurious?

According to Martin Stephen's English Literature – a student guide, it was during the 1920s and 1930s that 'systematic attempts began to be made to draw up specific, codified theories of the nature and function of both literature and criticism' but there remains 'much confusion and a fair number of red herrings'.

In terms of a 'scientific' approach, Martin Stephen feels that literary and critical theory consists of five main reference points: language and literary language; the work itself; society and the historical background to a work; the author, and the reader. Stephen believes that:

> *Most schools of literary and critical theory can be defined by their attitude to one or all these factors.*

Below are some very brief outlines of a few of the literary and critical theories which you may encounter as you research your texts for A Level study.

Archetypal Criticism foregrounds mythical patterns in literature which, because they are based on experiences intrinsic to human existence, are both deeply rooted and enduring. Such themes which are rooted in myth include the death-rebirth cycle; the search or quest for healing or regeneration; the battle with, and defeat of, a monster; and the Frankenstein and Faustian myths.

Russian Formalism originated in the 1920s and has had a major influence on subsequent literary and

and King) in texts, directing attention away from the author to the literary text itself, which worked because it defamiliarised language (Stephen) and allowed readers to see objects or ideas with a new awareness.

New Criticism (which arose in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s) took this idea further, for in some ways it was a reaction against criticism which relied upon biographical, literary and historical information concerning a text. New Criticism insisted that a text should stand alone and should demand close reading. Like Formalism, New Criticism emphasised the importance of language, that is to say literary language, and recognised the existence of ambiguities in texts.

Since the 1950s, Stylistics has had a strong influence, and this has perhaps been supported by a growing interest in linguistic study. The focus of Stylistics is, as its name implies, the style of a work; one of its aims is to distinguish the patterns of diction, sentence structure or rhythm and metre which might be said to define a work. As with Formalism and New Criticism, a Stylistics approach does not need to refer to the author, though once it has defined his or her style by linguistic analysis, it can be useful in comparing it to other styles.

Since the 1980s New Historicism has gained major influence. This critical view reacts against theories like New Criticism and Stylistics and studies literature in its historical and cultural context. Furthermore, New Historicism is interested in the critical reception of a text, both at the time it was published and in the years following its publication. Some believe that New Historicism has developed from other literary and critical theories which also focus on a work in its context. For example, Marxist theorists believe that historical and social developments have been influenced by class struggle. Since works of literature are products of certain ideologies, they should be studied within their contexts. Much Marxist criticism therefore concentrates on a text's level of realism and looks for its sub-text.

Feminist criticism incorporates many other critical approaches but its central premise is the belief that society is patriarchal (dominated by men) and that literature has always reflected this. Feminist critics are interested in the treatment of women writers and are doing much to redefine 'the canon'; they are also interested in the portrayal of women in literary works, and in how language itself is biased towards male dominance.

Standing apart from these approaches is Psychoanalytical criticism, influenced in its early form especially by the theories of Sigmund Freud. Freud believed that people have desires, often sexual, that are denied or repressed because of social conventions or personal circumstances. The desires do not go away, however, and literature can be a means by which the unconscious mind can express its repressed needs. Thus the unacceptable becomes acceptable as the author's deep rooted desires are disguised by symbolism to be decoded by the reader; for example, the lighthouse in Virginia Woolf's novel To The Lighthouse has been seen by some as a symbol of sexuality.

These necessarily brief outlines are just some of the various literary and critical theories which are available when interpreting literary works. The 'fun' comes in choosing which approaches may be most useful when applied to specific texts.

As a light-hearted practice exercise, it might be useful to take a well-known story such as The Three Little Pigs and apply the theories summarised above. Below and on page 32 are seven possible approaches to this familiar story. (This is the one about the three pigs, who each builds his house of straw, wood and bricks. The Big Bad Wolf blows down each house, starting with the house of straw;

each pig runs into his brother's house until they collect in the house of brick, which the wolf cannot destroy. The wolf then climbs down the chimney, but the pigs light a fire and he is defeated.)

See if you can identify the critical theories which inform each interpretation (some may be combined). The answers are on page 32, but I leave it to you to decide which could be useful, interesting, illuminating, spurious or just parodic!

Reading the Three Little Pigs

1. Close textual analysis reveals the real value of this story. The formulaic start, 'Once upon a time' offers a timeless dimension for the references which follow. Repetitive sequencing gives structural cohesion to the piece, both in dialogue 'Little pigs, little pigs, let me in, let me in' and in narrative voice 'and he blew the house down'. Phonological effects are used for characterisation, 'Not by the hair on my chinny chin chin', and to create tension, 'Then he huffed and he puffed …' The memorable alliteration of 'Big Bad Wolf' has guaranteed the fame of this particular antagonist in the literary canon. Defamiliarisation is evident in the anthropomorphisation of the principal characters.

2. Mythical and primordial images are inherent in every line: the beast at the door; the usurper; Grendel, and other monster myths. Links might be traced to Goldilocks and the Three Bears(which also features an intruder into domestic bliss) and Grimm's Little Red Riding Hood (which similarly includes a Big Bad Wolf). Traces of the story might be found in later texts such as The Three Musketeers (again, featuring a trio fighting tyrannous forces).

3. The story is typical of the bourgeois mentality which glorifies property ownership – the bigger, the better. The author is clearly influenced by capitalist ideology and portrays the pigs as heroes of materialism. Thus the wolf symbolises bourgeois fear of dispossession. In their attempts to prevent the loss of their property, the pigs fail to see the ludicrously limited vision of their own petit bourgeois aspirations – how they have been duped by capitalist ideology to embrace the dream
   On the other hand, perhaps the story is to be viewed as great literature, for it is informed by a gritty realism, which places it with such works as those by Brecht. The pigs represent the struggling underbelly of society; the proletarian pigs work day and night in their semi-feudalistic society. The Big Bad Wolf represents the ruling class, the greedy aristocrat who seeks to benefit from the sweat and labour of the lower orders. The Big Bad Wolf hopes to fatten himself, to grow rich by taking what the pigs have achieved. Their rebellion and refusal to relinquish power prefigures revolutionary movements of the modern period.

4. The author was clearly repressed. The chimney is a phallic symbol, with the fire roaring beneath as a symbol of passion. Or perhaps the fire could be seen as a cathartic experience, as the wolf achieves self-knowledge by recognising and facing his own burning desires. Alternatively, the brick house may represent the protection which individuals seek in order to secure privacy, security and stability. Taken a step further, the wolf's journey through the chimney to the cosy interior of the brick house might symbolise a desire to return to the womb – an inversion of the birth process.

5. 50% of the words are concrete nouns and 15% are adverbs alluding to time and place. The noun phrase 'The three little pigs' occurs 14 times in the story and mirrors the structure of the following noun phrase The Big Bad Wolf thus confirming the formulaic quality of the writing (where M = modifier and H = head word). Possessive determiners occur frequently: 'our house', 'your house' 'my chinny chin chin' etc. to highlight the oppositions established in the text.

6. It is clear that the story was written in a way that reflects the patriarchal values of former times, for it depicts three male characters who establish themselves in domestic settings, thus displacing women as traditional nurturers and homemakers. The porcine protagonists then form a triumverate to protect their territory, turning the brick house into a fortress and subverting the traditional, female use of the cooking pot for violent ends. Indeed the struggles of the pigs elevate them to heroic status, and their tactics to ward off the invader are rewarded by victory. This is a story in which patriarchal values reign supreme, for it does not even feature women as victims who have to be protected or as prizes to be fought for, a concept which is reflected in even the earliest literature.

7. Some critics have linked the text to the Christian story in Genesis, in which the serpent brings about the fall of Man. Others, however, feel that this link is tenuous, for unlike God's last and best creation, the pigs do not fall. The story is certainly very old, probably founded in the oral tradition of early folklore and recorded in writing in the nineteenth century. Victorian readers preferred it for its moral impact, and some Christian approaches drew attention to its allusions to the hell fire which awaited transgressors like the wolf.

In the twentieth century the growing market for children's literature saw its potential, and the text became adapted for the Ladybird series. Its linguistic repetitions and phonological playfulness also made it an ideal text for reading schemes.

The text remains popular with modern audiences. Post-Thatcher, the wolf came to be seen by some as representing the danger of rampant individualism and its threat to stable communities. Right-wing interpretation saw in the wolf the destabilisation of society brought about by homelessness and immigration; Left Wing approaches felt rather that the wolf symbolised the consequences of unemployment and poverty which inevitably leads to crime.

As you can see, even within a single critical perspective, it's possible to come up with different and even opposed readings (for instance, in reading three). Applying critical positions to a text such as this can be a fun way of exploring a range of possible readings, but in the end you need to construct the reading that you can defend and argue through coherently, so as to make the interpretation your own.

Answers

1. Russian Formalism/New Criticism.
2. Archetypal
3. Marxist
4. Psychoanalytical
5. Stylistics.
6. Feminist

7. New Historicism

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