

Lenses and the Lore

An Introduction to Literary
Theory



WHO

WHAT

WHERE

WHEN

WHY

HOW



“Politics is pervasive,
Language is constitutive,
Truth is provisional,
Meaning is contingent,
Human nature is a myth” (Barry 35)

What is Literary Theory?

A very basic way of thinking about literary theory is that these ideas act as different lenses critics use to view and talk about art, literature, and even culture.



These different lenses allow critics to consider works of art based on certain assumptions within that school of theory. The different lenses also allow critics to focus on particular aspects of a work they consider important. ("Literary Theory and Schools of Criticism.")

Liberal Humanism

- Says literature is “timeless” and focuses on “universal themes”
- Any particular work has its own inherent meaning, speaking to constants in human nature

-Requires no specific context within which to analyze a work; is what most people were exposed to in school as “close reading”

-Operates on the assumption that human nature is unchanging; themes and motifs are therefore “transcendent”

-Liberal humanists act as “mediators” between the text and the reader

-Values mimesis (showing) over diegesis (telling)



Professor and theologian F. D. Maurice is widely considered the forefather of liberal humanism.

When he was appointed professor of English literature at King's College in 1840, he stated that literature serves "to emancipate us...from the notions and habits which are peculiar to our own age...connecting us instead with what is fixed and enduring" (Barry 13).

We might use this “close reading” method to look for universal themes, such as in the tale of Skaði and Njord; in it we find such lasting motifs as the desire for revenge, a caution against judgment based on superficiality, and the dissolution of relationship when discordant in foundation.



Structuralism

- analyzes relating text to a larger, containing structure such as genre, inter and intra textual connections, and recurrent patterns; meanings are always “outside” the source and not within; relational in nature
- interprets literature based on linguistic constructs across cultural lines based on semiotics



Ferdinand de Saussure, a late 19th century Swiss linguist developed theories that became the foundation of the structuralist movement. He maintained that the meanings of words (langue) were arbitrary and that the sounds (parole) that informed meaning were strictly relational.



Anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss applied structuralist theory to mythology by suggesting that the individual tales did not have a separate or isolated meaning and could only be understood fully in the context of the entire body of myths from whence it came.

Deconstructionism

-A reaction to structuralism's linguistic relativity, deconstruction "maintains that the consequences of this belief are that we enter a universe of radical uncertainty, since we can have no access to any fixed landmark which is beyond linguistic processing, and hence we have no certain standard by which to measure anything" (Barry 59).

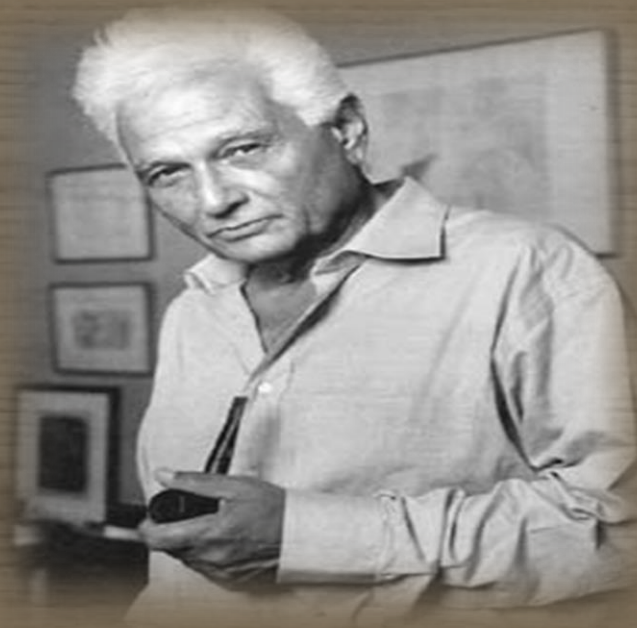
-Radical linguistic skepticism; focuses on the unreliability of language

-Argues that author intent is therefore irrelevant; the “death” of the author is the “birth” of the reader.

-Entirely focused on the subjectivity of material as opposed to any objective, unified “truths.”

-Focuses on “indeterminacy of meaning, showing how language always moves beyond and eludes fixity (Peck 136).

-Looks for aporias (“to be or not to be”), a plurality of undecided meanings, gaps or lacunas, blind spots, or moments of self-contradiction where the text begins to undermine its own presuppositions. Hermeneutics anyone?



Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) built upon the philosophies of Nietzsche and Heidegger before him to arrive at the conclusion that it is “différance” in which meaning should be sought since textual unity & coherence are conceptually fallacious.

A possible application for deconstructionist analysis might be the significance (or lack thereof) of Snorri's Christian syncretism; a great supplementary text to use as a reference for such a hypothesis would be Roland Barthes' "The Death of the Author," which argues that once an author releases his/her work it is inherently no longer his/her own, but is completely autonomous and dependent upon the reader for creation.





Modernism & Postmodernism

Modernism was a reaction to structuralism, embracing unconventional styles of presentation such as the surrealism of Kafka and the pastiche of Joyce; postmodernism, in turn, was a reaction to the self-importance and seriousness of modernism; it embraces irony, incredulity, and irreverence.

MODERNISM

VERSUS

POSTMODERNISM

Modernism was prevalent from late 19th century and early 20th-century style.

Postmodernism was prevalent from the mid-twentieth century.

Modernism was influenced by the first world war.

Postmodernism was influenced by the second world war.

Modernism was based on using rational and logical means to gain knowledge since it rejected realism.

Postmodernism was based on an unscientific, irrational thought process, and it rejected logical thinking.

Modernism rejected the conventional styles of prose and poetry.

Postmodernism deliberately uses a mixture of conventional styles.

While potentially difficult finding applications for the analysis of lore with modernist/postmodernist theory, insights into perception of the gods might be gleaned by instead looking at works depicting Norse mythology from within those movements.-

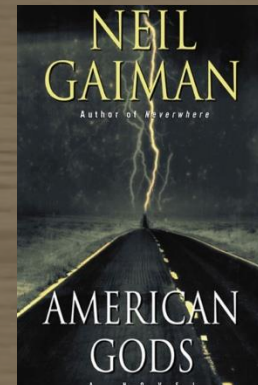
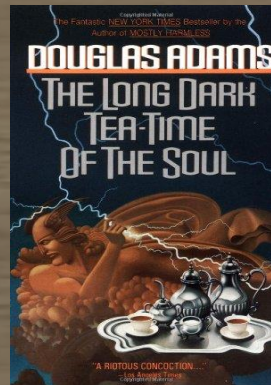
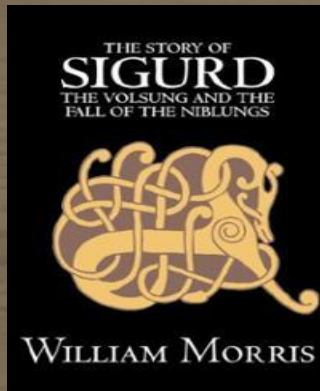
Modernist:

The Story of Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs by Willam Morris

Postmodernist:

The Long Dark Tea-Time of the Soul by Douglas Adams

American Gods by Neil Gaiman



Psychoanalytic criticism

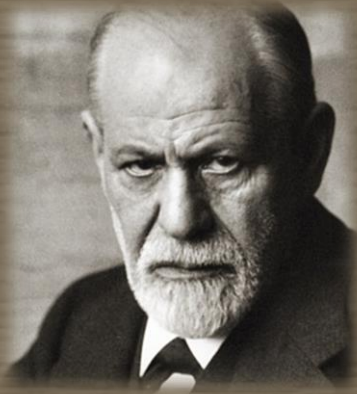
Uses many of the techniques of psychoanalysis in the interpretation of literature; “dreams and the unconscious, just like literature, do not make explicit statements. Both tend to communicate obliquely or indirectly...and representing meanings through concrete embodiments of time, place, or person” (Barry 94).

-Interprets literature by distinguishing between the conscious and the unconscious mind using the same techniques as psychoanalysis

-This can be applied to the motives and feelings of the author and/or the characters within the work, or even the text itself

-Demonstrates the presence of classic psychoanalytic symptoms, conditions, or phases in the work

-Not dependent on social or historical context



Sigmund Freud
1856-1939

pioneer of theories
of

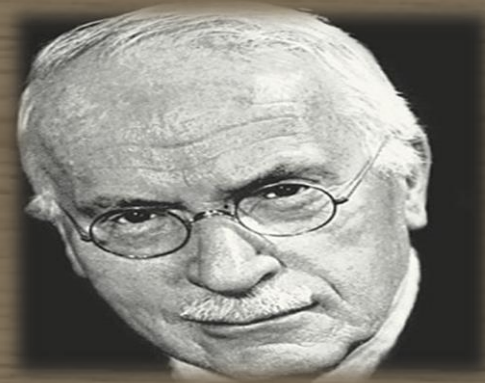
- the unconscious
- dream analysis
- condensation
- displacement



Jacques Lacan
1901-1981

most known for

- expanding on
Freud's theories
- mirror stage
- metaphor
- metonymy



Carl Jung
1875-1961

biggest contributions
were

- the collective unconscious
- archetypes
- individuation (dialectic
of personal & collective
unconscious)
- introversion/extroversion

Psychoanalytic criticism could be used to postulate why certain figures in the myths and/or sagas behave the way they do; for example, to determine why Thor (accepting the postulation that Jörð is indeed Jotun, or at least “other”) might have such loathing for giants based on psychological and sociological data available on “over identification” in mixed race individuals, and “ethnocultural transference and counter transference” as seen in therapeutic dyads.

Other major schools of literary and cultural criticism

FEMINIST CRITICISM

- reevaluates texts from women's perspective
- examines representations of women by both sexes
- examines power relations between sexes
- delineates between gender and sex
- questions gender as social construct

LESBIAN/GAY CRITICISM

- explores patriarchal nature of western culture and how it is central in establishing gender roles
- draws attention to homophobic nature present in works
- identifies elements in the text that exist in the middle, between the perceived masculine/feminine binary
- examines politics (ideological agendas) of specific gay, lesbian, or queer works, and how are those politics revealed in the work's thematic content or portrayals of its characters

MARXIST CRITICISM

- delineates “overt” and “covert” content and how the latter pertains to class struggle, social status, etc.
- determines whether author’s class status influenced work
- determines how geography/historical period influence work
- examines structure in context of politicization of form (for example, what does alliteration in *Beowulf* say about the society from which it came?)
- dissects nature of reality through Hegel’s dialectics

NEW HISTORICISM/CULTURAL MATERIALISM

- Juxtaposes literary and non-literary texts; “parallel reading”
- focus attention on patriarchal structures and their perpetuation
- agree with deconstructionists about unreliability of language, therefore seek out historical context for help in analysis
- four step approach;
- 1)historical context 2)theoretical method
- 3) political commitment
- 4) textual analysis

POSTCOLONIAL CRITICISM

- reject claims of “universalism” in Western literature instead showing limitations of outlook in differences of cultural, ethnic, social, etc. nature
- examine representation of other cultures in literature and symbolism therein
- marginality, plurality, and perceived “otherness” are seen as sources of energy and potential

STYLISTICS

- describe technical aspects of language, such as grammar, and use this data in interpretation
- uses the methods and findings of the science of linguistics
- modernized version of the discipline of rhetoric

NARRATOLOGY

- seeks out recurrent structures within narratives
- focus on the teller and the telling rather than solely content
- Aristotelian concepts of “hamartia, anagnorisis, and peripetia” are central
- of special interest in dissecting lore is Vladimir Propp’s *The Morphology of the Folktale*, in which he cites the 31 functions present in all such narratives
- An offshoot of structuralism

ECOCRITICISM

- equates content of literature to the physical environment
- overlay concepts of nature to occurrences within a text to gain insight
- operate from the perspective that nature is a “blueprint”
- My own research into the Finnsburgh Episode in *Beowulf* read-” there is an intended parallelism between the cyclicity of nature and that of violence in the lay. The violence went dormant, whether for reasons of battle weariness or seasonal necessity, over the winter; ‘Hengest stayed, lived out that whole resentful, blood-sullen winter with Finn’ (Beowulf 66). The Danes were both literally and figuratively ‘shackled in ice until another year appeared in the yard...the seasons constant...then winter was gone...longing woke...for a voyage home but more for vengeance’ (Beowulf 66). Like the ever shifting seasons and rebirth spring offers, the desire for vengeance is recurring.”

“One of the motivating factors of [literary criticism] was that it democratized the experience of literature...”(Young 165).

Walter Benjamin states “it is our task not to decipher the text, but rather to cipher it differently-not entirely differently or in an utterly free manner, but rather in such a way as to supplement the original’s own mode of ciphering” (qtd. in Kohlross).

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