

LITERARY THEORY

AN INTRODUCTION OF CRITICAL CONCEPTS AND SCHOOLS

compiled for the seminar
"American Indians: An Introduction," Summer 2008

Philipp Kneis, M.A. • pjkx.com • 11/04/ 2009

Overview

2

Abstract:

This presentation provides a brief overview of literary theory, introducing key concepts and various schools of analysis.

Contents:

1. What is Literature?
2. Some Basics for Literary Analysis
3. Literary Theory
4. Summary

3

1. What is Literature?

Working towards a definition of “literature.”

1. What is Literature?

4

Texts can be

- fiction
- non-fiction

- poetry
- prose
- drama

- „merely“ text
- audio-visual

1. What is Literature?

5

Texts can be

- of „high quality“
- of „low quality“

- assigned to specific ethnic, social, gender, age groups

- canonized (belonging to an elite body of work)
- outside the canon

1. What is Literature?

- literature is communication
- literature is storytelling (in a general sense)
- stories are a basic part of the human condition and reflect upon that
- stories are told by someone, and/or written down by someone
- the teller / author / writer of the story is influenced by several factors (cultural background, social circumstances, psychology, history, other texts)
- it is usually possible to discern literature from other texts
- there must be some things that differentiate literature from other forms of human communication

1. What is Literature?

Working Definition:

- literature is a form of communication that differs from “everyday” usage of language and communication – this is contingent upon local, temporal, social contexts
- certain markers and conventions designate a text as literature, and as belonging to a specific literary genre

this can be achieved by:

- a more or less slightly different way of speaking (use of metaphors, symbols, etc.)
- structural conventions of narration
- setting the story in surroundings not coinciding with those of the speaker

2. Some Basics for Literary Analysis

Genre and Narration

2. Some Basics for Literary Analysis

Genre can designate:

- classical formal categories (poetry, prose, drama)
- text types (poem, novel, diary, autobiography, essay, scholarly article, newspaper article, song, ...)
- topical categories (comedy, tragedy; science fiction, horror, romance, Western, ...)

Genre is

- classification of existing texts
- guiding production of texts
- guiding / arising from user expectation

2. Some Basics for Literary Analysis

10

Narration

- is a function of the text

the narrator

- is NEVER the author
- the narrator is the instance in the text from whose perspective the text is told
- can be omniscient or not, first-person, third-person

3. Literary Theory

An overview of approaches and schools.

3. Literary Theory

12

Theory is

- a way of seeing
- a model of understanding

- never exclusive (although it is often claimed to be)
- always evolving

- several approaches can be applied to the same text
- the richness of theoretical approaches is what makes literary analysis “fun”

3. Literary Theory

There exists a “classical” or “aesthetic” approach to literature which is often taught in schools or poetry seminars.

It is often not called “theory,” but that does not mean that there is no theory behind it – only that the theory is hidden, or unspecified.

3. Literary Theory: Aesthetic Approach

- a text is analyzed for what makes it special or “good” and to explain how an aesthetic effect is achieved
- this may also expose “hidden” meanings and connections

- several formal criteria are looked for in the text and used towards “interpretation” or analysis, such as
 - finding figures of speech, rhetorical or figurative devices (alliteration, rhyme, irony, metaphor, symbol, etc. etc. etc.),
 - analyzing meter in poetry and
 - analyzing structuring of partial or entire texts

- frequent key question: “what did the author mean to tell us”?
- this is an outdated and oftentimes fallacious approach

3. Literary Theory

Various other ways of approaching literature have been developed in the past.

Mostly, these theories originate from other fields (like philosophy) and may be applied to literature.

Some of these will now be introduced very briefly.

3. Literary Theory: Various Schools (1)

Various ways of approaching literature have been developed in the past, such as:

- **Hermeneutics** (Heidegger, Husserl, Gadamer; gk. *heurisko*: to find)
19th century : trying to find the original intention of the author,
20th century: focus on understanding, knowledge dependent on interpretation
- **Semiotics** (Saussure, Peirce, Eco; gk. *sêmeion*: sign):
investigating structures and occurrences of processes of signification and understanding, focus on signs and symbols and extra-language communication
- **Structuralism** (Saussure, Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, Chomsky, Jakobson):
strong linguistic focus, texts consist of signs, signs are arbitrary (no relation between the form and the sign necessary), analysis of how signs are used in the text

3. Literary Theory: Various Schools (2)

- **New Criticism** (Brooks, Blackmur, Tate, Wimsatt, Warren): close reading, less focus on extra-textual elements
- **New Historicism** (Greenblatt): investigating historical and cultural contexts of texts
- **Reader-Response Criticism** (Holland, Stanley, Fish, Iser): focusing on how the text is taken up by the reader
- **Post-Structuralism & Deconstruction** (Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, Jameson, Culler): increasing the focus on language and interconnectivity of texts (**discourse**), breaking barriers between genres and media, stressing arbitrariness and richness of possible explanations, “death” of the author (more later on that subject)

3. Literary Theory

Some bodies and elements of theory will now be discussed in greater detail.

3. Literary Theory: Death of the Author

intentional fallacy: Wimsatt & Beardsley, 1954

“[T]he design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art”

death of the author: Barthes, 1968

- text creation is more complex than the mere writing down of words by a romantic creator-genius
- texts may get a different meaning independent from the writer's intention
- the “author” is not the best authority on the text

3. Literary Theory: Psychoanalysis

20

- ❑ are human beings the masters of their soul (psychê)?
- ❑ how are humans subjected to inner drives and motivations?

- ❑ ancient stories carry information about human psychology (Oedipus, Elektra, Narcissus)
- ❑ dreams have psychological meaning
- ❑ sexuality plays a major part in psychology
- ❑ childhood experiences are formative; violence and abuse are not forgotten

- ❑ Jung: archetypes can be found in stories that may contain very old images within a cultural imaginary (e.g. serpents, night, heights...)

3. Literary Theory: The Canon Debate

- oftentimes, “literature” means “great literature”
- this refers to a body of works considered cornerstones of culture (called canon)
- such a body of work always reflects attitudes and power structures

- this canon is questioned by three overall trends:
 - the rise of democracy (**class**)
 - female and gay/lesbian emancipation (**gender**)
 - the end of slavery, the quest for civil rights for minorities, as well as decolonization; and critique of racism (**race**)

- this generally means that the canon is being enlarged by new titles, and that some older titles may no longer be considered “canonical”
- this also, however, may question the very reliance upon a canon as such!

3. Literary Theory: Marxist Criticism

22

- based on a materialist critique of society and culture: analyzing constraints and (hidden or overt) power structures
- dialectics: thesis + antithesis = synthesis
- “being determines consciousness”: a person’s state of mind is determined by their material living conditions and their place in society (CAUTION: determinism may be too mono-causal)
- how are lower and middle classes presented? / quest for realism
- battling the myth of a classless or a middle class society

- how does society function? (=is / descriptive/a question of truth value)
- is this the way society should function? (=ought / normative/evaluative/prescriptive)
- how are these political levels represented in the text?

- are people represented as people, or according to stereotypes? (focus on depictions of **race**, **class**, and **gender**)

3. Literary Theory: Gender Studies

23

- ❑ gender studies has its origin in women's studies
- ❑ focus on depictions of gender:
especially stereotypes of both men and women (and others)
- ❑ sex: biological attributes
- ❑ gender: cultural roles (may coincide with biology or not)
- ❑ leads to: discussions on prevalence of **nature** or **culture** (or both)
- ❑ presentations of gender / stereotyping of human beings by sex and/or gender **roles**: is the individual shown, or a caricature?
- ❑ heterosexuality – homosexuality – trans-gender discussions
- ❑ family roles: private sphere (female?) vs. public sphere (male?)

3. Literary Theory: Postcolonialism

24

- inclusion of other voices into the canon which do not generally belong to the privileged classes
- “subalternity”: a position of being disadvantaged/colonized opposite a “hegemonic”/colonizing structure
- is the subaltern subject allowed to speak for themselves?
- who owns the representation of others?
- is an “other” needed to depict one’s own culture? do alien cultures appear different and less human through a process of “othering”?
- inclusion of others means to question one’s own self
- but: critique of nationalism oftentimes creates new nationalisms

4. Summary

What does this mean for our understanding of literature?

4. Summary

Literature is

- a constantly evolving body of works of not merely descriptive, documentary, or everyday nature (depending on context)
- derived from the entirety of the cultural discourse
- written (or filmed, photographed, ...) by one or more persons
- who are only one authority amongst many on the respective text

- Literature can be approached in many ways.
- none of these ways need to be “better” than others
- which theoretical approach is used depends on the text, and the main questions asked by the respective scholar

References

27

- Barthes, Roland. “The Death of the Author.” *Image – Music – Text*. New York: Hill & Wang, 1977. 142-148.
online: <http://evans-experientialism.freewebspace.com/barthes06.htm>
- Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory. An Introduction*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 21996.
- Eco, Umberto. “How to Play Indians.” *How to Travel with a Salmon and other Essays*. Fort Washington, PA: Harvest Books: 1995.
(*Il Second Diario Minimo*. Milano: Bompiani, 1992.) 217-221.
- Wimsatt, William Kurtz Jr., Monroe C. Beardsley. *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954.

recommended:

- **Culler, Jonathan. *Literary Theory. A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997/2000.**