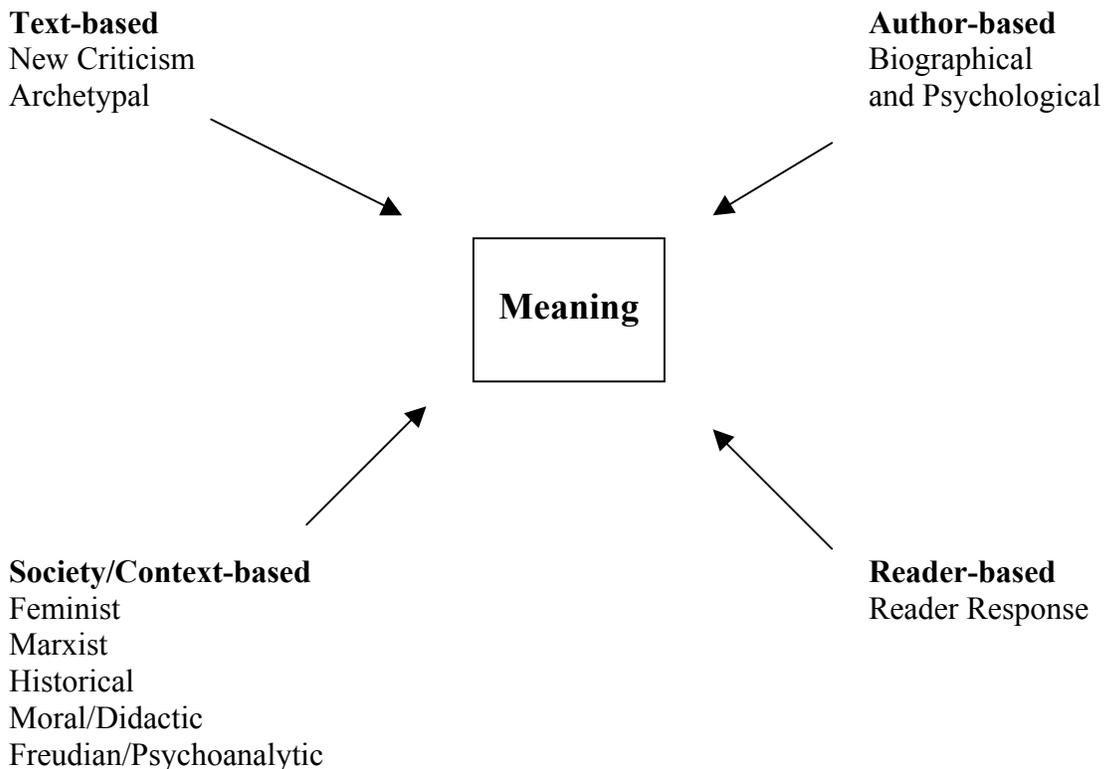


Literary Theory*

Many, many dissertations have been written about what exactly literary theory is, but to put it briefly, literary theory describes different approaches to studying literature. Essentially, literary theories are lenses that a reader can apply in order to view a text in a new light. Imagine that you have a collection of glasses made up of different colors. One pair lets you see everything in blue, another in red, etc. Literary theory is like that. You can read a story with different lenses on and see it as a cautionary tale (moral/didactic), as a comment on the role of women (feminist), as the struggle between classes (Marxist), etc. This sheet will help you identify different approaches to literature so that you can apply them in your own leisure time. Some folks are pretty strict and like to stick with one theory, but most readers mix many of these approaches without even realizing they are doing so. That's okay; it's like wearing a couple pairs of glasses at the same time (or bifocals).

Following is a short list of common theories and some quick definitions. Included are a number of focus questions that you can use when you're reading a text with this lens.

For those of you who are visual learners, here's a graphic.



Text-based

New Criticism

This approach focuses primarily on the text itself and tends to avoid outside influences such as historical and biographical information. Texts stand alone. Authors have ideas, they write to communicate those ideas, and good readers can uncover the meaning and the author's intention. For example, you might believe that "Hansel and Gretel" is about children recognizing the negative impact of the female in their lives, but a new critic would tell you it is a story about two kids getting abandoned in the woods. Perhaps they are coming of age; perhaps they are overcoming challenges. New critics rely on analysis of literary elements: plot, theme, setting, tone, characters, etc.

Focus Questions

What are the dominant literary elements?

How do those elements work together?

How do those elements convey theme and develop meaning?

Archetypal

Stemming from Carl Jung's theory, this approach searches for universal meanings in a piece of literature. An archetype is a symbol, character type or motif that is universally recognized in myth, dream, and literature. Archetypal critics focus on the symbolism and imagery in the text. Some images include water, fire, seasons, colors, shapes, animals, and numbers. Some archetypal characters include the hero, martyr, mentor, scapegoat, and phases of women. An archetypal critic might see "Hansel and Gretel" as a story that presents the hero quest, the need to follow the path, the uncertainty of the wild woods, and the presentation of the three phases of females in literature: virgin, matron, hag.

Focus Questions

Identify motif, symbol and imagery in the text.

Author-based

Biographical and Psychological

This approach focuses on the author's life and experiences. The psychological side examines how the author's emotional upbringing or psychological history impacts a text. Biographical criticism relies on a close examination of character and motivations and their symbolic meanings (impulses, desires, feelings) that might be linked with the author. A biographical and psychological analysis of "Hansel and Gretel" might have you looking at the author's childhood. Did he get lost in the woods and fear it? Was he abandoned as a child? Did he have a stepmother who starved him?

Focus Questions

What are the intentions of the author?

What life experiences are noteworthy in the author's life?

Was the author's life happy? Sad? Social? Solitary?

Why do characters act the way they do? What are their motives overt or covert?

Reader-based

Reader Response

Focusing on the reader's emotional connection to a piece, this approach downplays reading for information or interpretation. Sometimes authors do not write works to be analyzed but works in reaction to an experience. Readers are expected to react emotionally to such a work. Regardless of author intent, each reader reacts individually to a text and its significance. A reader response to "Hansel and Gretel" might probe the idea of a candy house in the woods, and why did the witch eat children when she had lots of chickens around. If these are issues that interest the reader, they are what guide the reader.

Focus Questions

- What parts of the story did the reader like best and why?
- What words, phrases, or lines in the story did the reader think was the most important and why?

Society/Context-based

Feminist

Feminist literary theory focuses on society's beliefs about the nature and function of women in the world. These critics may focus on many things: sexual stereotypes including men as oppressors and women in subservient positions, women overcoming oppression, patriarchal vs. matriarch systems, intimacy in relationships, independence and dependence, images of women's bodies, language differences between women and men, the psyches of women, and the culture that shapes women (Moore 119). A feminist interpretation of "Hansel and Gretel" might claim that both the stepmother and the witch wanted to destroy the children because they were rescuing them from a society that demeaned females. They might note the even though Hansel is considered the clever one, he ends up with a trail of bread crumbs, lives in a cage, and has to be saved by a sister who is "man enough" to push the witch in the oven.

Focus Questions

- How are symbols used and are they gendered?
- How is language used and is it gendered?
- How are female characters portrayed? Do the portrayals reinforce or undermine sexual stereotypes?
- How important are the female characters and how individual in their own right?
- In their relationships with men, how are they treated? Are they given equal status? Ignored? Patronized? Demeaned?
- What is the social and familial structure presented in the text?

Marxist

Based on some of the beliefs of Karl Marx, this theory focuses on the importance of class, class relations, and power. Readers of this theory view texts through an economic and hierarchical lens. How the economy is ordered and how the classes are ranked, how races relate and are treated, who holds power and how they hold it, these can all

determine how we analyze a text. For example, “Hansel and Gretel” could be seen as a situation where the lower class (children) are subjected to all kinds of horrors when the leaders (parents) care more for their own welfare (their bellies) than that of their subjects. These critics might also claim that it is economics that drive all motivation. After all, if there was no famine, there would be no abandonment.

Focus Questions

- Who has the power/money? Who does not? What happens as a result?
- What sets of beliefs drive characters?
- How is power allocated among different groups/characters?
- What kinds of power struggles does the text present? Which ones might be considered class conflicts?

Historical

This approach examines the events surrounding the setting of the text and claims that if the reader does not have access to that information, part of the text is missing. A text cannot be read in a vacuum. In order to analyze it, readers must understand the literary and historical events that impacted the author and the production of the text. For example, to fully appreciate a text written about life in NYC after 9-11, readers would need to be familiar with that tragedy. Though this may seem obvious, think of other events in history and how they might have impacted texts. Back to our friends Hansel and Gretel, it is possible that when this tale was first told as an oral wonder tale, ditching your unwanted children in the woods was not so uncommon (think about how people abandon unwanted pets along the side of the road, or even how newborn babies are left on hospital doors or even in dumpsters). Perhaps at the time of H&G there were a number of famines, and children were considered superfluous.

Focus Questions

- What historical events are of significance to the setting of the text?
- What events in society influenced the author in the writing of the text?
- How do the text, author, and culture context work together to produce meaning?

Moral/Didactic

Does the work convey a lesson? Does it teach the reader morals? Is the “meaning” how to better yourself, your life, your world? If the answer can be yes, the text can be viewed from a moral/didactic standpoint. What lessons can you learn from H&G? Pay attention to your parents? How about the importance of being kind and loving to your children and following your instincts when it comes to NOT abandoning them in the woods. And if you try to do bad things to children (like eat them), bad things will happen to you.

Focus Questions

- What ideas does the work contain? How strongly does the work bring forth its ideas?
- How may the ideas be evaluated morally?
- How are the actions of the protagonist rewarded and the actions of the antagonist punished?

Freudian/Psychoanalytical

This approach stems from the theories of Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis. Freud believed that we are all heavily influenced by the unconscious. The mind is made up of the id (instinctual impulses), the superego (an “internal censor bringing social pressures—reality—to bear on the id”) and the ego (consciousness). Relying heavily on symbolism and motivation, Freudian critics might approach H&G by examining possible impulsive behaviors and their motives: murder (of the stepmother and witch), abandonment, survival, and cannibalism. Freudian critics might also examine objects as symbols: the candy house and/oven as a womb, the bird as a nurturer, and the pebbles and bread crumbs as seeds. Freud was also the man who coined the terms Oedipal complex and Electra complex, so sexual relationships and motivations (conscious or unconscious) are part of this analysis.

Focus Questions

- What objects in the story can work as symbols?
- What relationships are at play in the text?
- In what way are these relationships sexually charged or motivated?
- How do the id, superego and ego manifest themselves in the text?
- Do certain characters identify primarily with one of these?

*Much of this information was gleaned from handouts from Kocis/Thorsen and from C. High Holman’s *A Handbook to Literature*.