

From Close Reading to Theory and Back Again

Do you have to make a choice between close reading and literary theory? Dr Nonia Williams Korteling takes us on a whistle stop tour of the history of ideas about criticism to show that in contemporary literary studies it is possible – and in fact, desirable – to do both.

Offer a close reading of the following poem, commenting on the relationship between its form and meaning.

If you are, or ever have been, an English Literature student, you are likely to be familiar with this kind of assignment. It is based on the idea that we can read an isolated piece of text (and it often is a poem – more on that in a bit) and say something meaningful about it, just like that. We might, on the one hand, know that wider historical and theoretical approaches inform and enrich our reading of literature, and yet there are still times where it feels like we put that approach to one side in favour of ‘close reading’ or ‘unseens’. At the University of East Anglia (UEA), our first years have compulsory close reading modules, and their work is judged on how minutely attentive their reading skills are. ‘Literature in History’ modules are also compulsory, and they must engage with theory. But even there, their writing is still substantively credited for its close attention to detail, for its work with the words on the page.

So why, as a subject, do we still predominantly value such an approach, and how did it come about?

The Study of English Literature

It’s hard to believe it now, because English Literature is widely accepted as a traditional and respectable academic subject, but it was actually rather a latecomer to university study. The study of it began in ordinary life, outside the academy, in working men’s clubs and women’s reading groups, and it only reluctantly began to be admitted by a handful of universities at the end of the 19th century. The reading and discussion of literature written in the vernacular, the language that ordinary people speak, was seen as okay for polite conversation and evening chatter, but not as proper for university study, where the classics in Greek and Latin still held sway.

This meant that when English Literature did enter the university, it was a controversial subject, with something to prove. To be taken seriously, it needed to demonstrate its worth, to show that there was a ‘science’ to the study of it that it could be weighed, measured and examined.

The Science of Close Reading

Despite initial resistance, by the first half of the 20th century, university study of English Literature was becoming more widely accepted. Even so, academics teaching it still felt the need to defend and prove its credibility. One such group keen to establish the subject as a matter for serious study were the New Critics, a collection of American academics. This included people such as Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren and William K. Wimsatt Jr, among others. Their work focussed on poetry, and took a formalist close reading (or practical criticism) approach. They argued that 'good' and valuable poems are like beautiful art objects or musical compositions. Cleanth Brooks' *The Well-Wrought Urn* (1947), for example, closely reads the poetry of Donne, Shakespeare and Keats, and claims that their poems are complicated, finely wrought wholes. Such objects can, he claims, be taught and studied in and of themselves, can be weighed and measured, scrutinised, appreciated and valued for their demonstrable craftsmanship and coherence, for the harmonious relationship between form, content and meaning. Once subjected to this kind of attentive close reading approach, the New Critics argued, a poem's deeper meaning and truth become clear.

What's more, they said, they could identify, explain and quantify the requisite skills for reading and appreciating poetry, and these skills needed to be taught. In Britain, in the 1920s, I.A. Richards had conducted an 'experiment' on his students, where he found that, when given anonymised poems, they did not always judge as 'good' those poems by celebrated and canonical writers. For Richards, this demonstrated a lack of understanding about how to properly read, judge and appreciate poetry. (We might want to question this – Richards assumed his judgements right, and those of his students' wrong, but this is, of course, a matter of opinion.) He, and later the New Critics, concluded that teaching 'proper' close reading was key. It was an influential, and, dare I say it, really rather useful approach: one that helped raise the status of the subject and which is still present in the way many of us are schooled today. As students of English Literature, close reading can still get us a long way.

The Theory Wars

In the second-half of the 20th century, the next generation of literary critics became suspicious of such an approach. Hang on a minute, they asked, is a poem always coherent and meaningful? Can we understand this meaning just by looking at the words on the page and nothing else? Where does this meaning come from, anyway, and whose is it? What about novels and short stories? Can such a method work for them? And so on. One of the things these critics were most suspicious of was the way that the New Critics assumed that they knew which poems were valuable, meaningful and worth studying, and which ones weren't.

The later critics reacted against what they saw as an elitist and fixed approach by turning to ideas that often didn't seem to be about literature at all – ideas such as marxism, feminism, linguistics, psychoanalysis, philosophy and more. This huge and vast-ranging group of ideas prompted literary critics to ask more and more questions about, for example, the historical, political and personal context in which a piece of literature was produced, or the significance of gender, sexuality or class to the reading or writing of texts. They interrogated, deconstructed and overturned previously held understandings of literature: indeed, these later critics went as far as to interrogate the very possibility of a stable relationship between language and the world at all. A piece of literature could no longer be seen as a thing in itself, something coherent or of inherent value, but something always inevitably caught up in struggles of power, politics and authority, something whose 'designs' on us we must be suspicious of, whose purpose is to captivate and lull us. Critics like Terry Eagleton and Georg Lukacs, for example, drew on marxism to question the relationship between literature, power and politics, whereas critics such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar wrote *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), a vast feminist text which claims to reveal deep-seated sexist representations throughout literary history. By the 1980s and 1990s, being an English Literature academic meant declaring your theoretical

colours. Literature could no longer be read as words on the page – as beautiful art object – but must instead be considered in terms of a marxist-feminist-queer-Freudian deconstructive critique, or whatever your personal stance happened to be. And indeed, as students of literature this approach is also one we still attend to.

A Return to Aesthetics?

Critics in the 21st century have asked whether and how we might be able to bring these two things together: to return to close reading literature in order to appreciate its beauty and artistry, while at the same time being mindful of theory, of the depth of understanding that engaging with politics, philosophy and more brings to our reading. Such an approach wants to move away from the stance of suspicion taken during the 'theory wars' and towards a deeper understanding of our appreciation of literature. While doing a feminist or postcolonial reading of, say, *Jane Eyre*, in the manner of Gilbert and Gubar or Gayatri Spivak, can further our understanding and appreciation of the novel, it can't really explain why *Jane Eyre* moves us. Of course, as someone like Isobel Armstrong reminds us, the very concepts of aesthetics and beauty themselves are steeped in politics and history, and our own historical-political-social-personal context deeply affects which poems and novels we find beautiful. Nevertheless, an appreciation of beauty that is aware, but also wary of, the vast range and uses of theory for the study of literature, can be one that enables our readings of literature to be particularly attentive and self-reflexive.

Aesthetics of Theory

This is certainly an approach that works for me and many of my students. When I teach 'Critical Theory' to second years at UEA, some are captivated by Marx or Freud or Derrida, and many by feminisms and queer theory, but after having grappled with the sheer difficulty of these big thinkers and ideas, it's the discussion of the beauty and pleasure of literature that helps us make sense of it. The module begins with the New Critics and close reading, then we're steeped in the headiness of high theory all semester until we return to new aestheticism, when we reconsider close reading in light of it all. Are we more cautious readers at the end? For sure. More self-conscious and attentive? I hope so. We could certainly no longer take the question I started this article with at face value, or accept its terms without questioning its assumptions, or our own. And, hopefully, all this helps us write a better, deeper response

Article Written By: Dr Nonia Williams Korteling teaches Reading Texts, Critical Theory, Modernism and Women's Writing in the School of Literature, Drama and Creative Writing at UEA.

This article first appeared in emagazine 75, February 2017.

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