

Theoretically speaking

What can critical approaches offer you as you develop your own independent reading? Dr Andrew Green shows how theory can open up new possibilities, using Dylan Thomas's 'Do not go gentle' as an example.

Why use literary theory?

The thought of using literary theory often fills students - and their teachers - with dread. There are, it is true, certain difficulties that come with trying to apply theory to what may already be difficult texts. Robert Eaglestone, who has done much to advocate the use of theory, nonetheless acknowledges that there is a 'hardness' about theory that can seem off-putting. But there is also real satisfaction and excitement to be gained from the exercise of 'reading' texts with theory. This article suggests some ways in which you could use literary theory to enhance your enjoyment of the literature you study and your responses to it, using Dylan Thomas's famous poem 'Do not go gentle into that good night' as a focus.

The readers respond

So what should be the role of literary theory within your A Level studies? At the most basic level it might mean being able to respond with intelligence and in an appropriate fashion to the responses of your peers and teachers. In itself this is a theoretical proposition underpinning reader-response theory, which sees the reader and the text as equal participants in the construction of meaning. The meaning of a text, therefore, involves acts of creative projection on behalf of both the author and the reader and meaning becomes conditional - a unique construction for every reader which is differently reconstructed with every subsequent reading. Without an active discussion of the processes by which individual readers employ a range of experiences to interrogate the text and build meaning from it, this is implicit theory without explicit intellectual meaning.

The tools of the trade

To restrict 'interpretations by other readers' to readers only within your own classroom, would also deny you the excitement and stimulation of exploring a whole range of readings and perspectives outside your immediate experience. Your abilities as students of literature and your enjoyment of the processes of reading will be enhanced by some engagement with literary criticism and literary theory.

Although detailed knowledge of the full range of literary theories - reader-response theory, deconstruction, queer theory, feminism, Marxist theory, post-structuralism, semiotics and so on - is not necessary, some understanding of the main ideas and perspectives of the major literary theories will provide you with the tools to view texts from a much wider range of perspectives, allowing you to develop responses which are both informed and independent.

Working with literary theory

So, how might this look in practice? What follows is an experiment to see how the basic ideas of some of the main literary theories might illuminate or deepen your appreciation of Dylan Thomas's poem 'Do not go gentle into that good night'.

First of all, the poem may be considered from a range of perspectives - the text can be subjected to linguistic, literary or cultural analysis. This represents three modes of English study - language, literature and cultural studies - each of which provides interesting points of view from which to analyse the text. Some key areas for consideration are suggested below:

- Linguistic
 - 'Do not go' is a negative imperative form of the verb; 'gentle' is an adverb (more typically 'gently') or may be a noun (a contraction of gentleman - in this case the poet's father); 'into' is a preposition of motion; 'that good night' is a noun phrase.
- Literary
 - Adopts the artfully repetitive form of the villanelle, a circular French form; adopts a euphemistic approach to death ('that good night'); defies conventional peaceful literary death scenes.
- Cultural
 - 'Do not go' echoes the biblical prohibition of 'thou shalt not' which is found in the Ten Commandments - reflects Welsh chapel culture; cultural fear of death.

Each of these perspectives provides issues for analysis which overlap and interact, and which should be synthesised in analysing the poem's possible meanings. You may, for example, connect the use of the negative imperative 'Do not go' with cultural notions of sin and death within the Christian religion, thus linking linguistic and cultural analysis. Similarly, the poet's use of the literary device of euphemism ('that good night') can be connected with cultural attitudes towards death.

Even at this simple level, therefore, the 'theoretical' division of the analysis of text provides us with complex and layered means of reading. This can be enhanced, however, by considering a range of literary theoretical concepts, each of which can open up further layers of potential meaning.

Taking theory further

Formalist and functionalist theorists often focus on defamiliarisation. This is a means by which the familiar is made unfamiliar, often to striking effect. A good example of this relates to the poem's treatment of death. We often see death as an absolute power which it is impossible to resist. Thomas's insistent instruction to 'Rage, rage against the dying of the light' and other imprecations fiercely to combat death, however, challenge this view. By employing the traditional image of life as light and death as darkness, Thomas establishes a familiar view of death, but at the same time undermines the view that death is an irresistible force. This also stands in contrast to traditional romantic presentations of death in poetry, where peaceful acceptance and passivity are often the norm. The 'rage' and fight he demands of his father contrasts to the traditional desire that the dying should be at peace, and demonstrates the extent of the poet's emotion, powerfully conveying his distress at the seemingly passive response of his father as he approaches death.

Psychological theory - father and son

Psychological theorists may approach Thomas's representation of death in the poem rather differently. They may relate this to the biographical situation of the poet, who uses this poem to reflect on the disconcertingly changed nature of his irascible father as he approaches death. They may, for example, address the comparative mental states of the dying father and the living son, considering how they respond to the imminent death envisaged in the poem. What, we may ask, has caused the father, unlike the 'wise men', the 'good men', the 'wild men' and the 'grave men' the son imagines, to be so uncharacteristically 'gentle' and unresistant in the face of death. The appeal to the father in the final stanza to 'Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray' illustrates the dying man's unfamiliar mental attitude. This psychological change also has its impact on the son. It is clear that he would rather face the fierce 'curse' of the father than such unnatural quietness. The juxtaposition of the words 'curse' and 'bless' makes clear the psychological turmoil of the son, who would see a 'curse' as a blessing, being more true to the nature of the father he has hitherto known.

The therapeutic text?

Within the psychoanalytical approach, is one strand called transactional analysis. This would place particular emphasis on the therapeutic nature of the text, looking at how the writer establishes an emotional framework surrounding death within which readers can explore their own emotional response to the issue. It is possible, as suggested above, to read the poem as Thomas's exploration of his own mental state. To that extent the poem may be seen as therapeutic, even cathartic. It is a means by which the poet works out his own complex emotions to his father's mortality and how the manner of his passing relates to his life. The poem also provides a means by which we can explore our own responses to death, however. These responses may be placed within either humanist (emphasis on the state of 'men') or religious (Christian notions of 'light'/life and 'dark'/death) frames of reference. This encourages us to consider our own relation with the issue of mortality and the death of close relatives.

Challenging the universal

Rather differently, Marxist, Cultural Materialist and New Historicist theoretical approaches often display an inherent suspicion of notions of the 'natural' and the 'universal'. As such they may well concentrate on the idea of natural/unnatural relations between father and son or natural/unnatural responses to the imminent death of a loved one. Is it possible, they would ask, to establish what such natural and unnatural responses should be? Such theories would challenge the idea that there should be any universally accepted response in either of these situations. They would see in any response a particular politico-cultural construct, created in a unique moment by a unique combination of forces. They may, for example, look at Thomas's use of religious ideas and symbolism within the poem. Why, for example, does he place such emphasis on the imagery of light and dark? And what is the significance of the apocalyptic elemental imagery (imagery related to the coming of the end of the world) he employs in this poem and elsewhere - for example in 'In Country Sleep', 'Over Sir John's Hill' and 'Poem on his Birthday'? Such issues point clearly to Thomas's Welsh chapel background, illustrating the power this social milieu had on the formation of his ideas. They create for him a means of thinking and of producing his responses to death.

Raging silence - the structuralist's view

Structuralist critics may look at the gaps and silences of the poem. This is a strikingly noisy poem in many ways, full of raging and storming as a selection of its vocabulary demonstrates - 'burn', 'rave', 'rage', 'lightning', 'crying', 'sang'. It is also full of profound silences, however. The only voice we hear is

that of the son. What, we wonder, are the views of the dying father, who is not allowed a voice, and what are the reasons for his quietness in the face of death? He will, we remember, neither 'curse' nor 'bless' the son in the final stanza, but remains silent. There is also a certain irony underpinning the use of words in this poem, which are seen as ultimately powerless. For all the son's desperation and anger, and his attempts to use language to force out meaning - illustrated in the circular and insistent repetitions of the villanelle - his words, like those of the wise men in stanza two, 'forked no lightning', becoming merely rage. Perhaps the greatest wisdom lies not in words but in the silence of the father.

Reading the feminine

Related to this, feminist theorists may choose to question gender paradigms in the poem, looking at the balance between conventional views of masculinity (rationality, impersonal exterior, noise, activity, strength, etc.) and femininity (emotional, personal interior, quietness, passivity, etc.), considering how far these traits appear and mingle in the poem. The son urges displays of masculine strength, noise and activity in the face of death, whereas the father seems to eschew such masculine 'rage', preferring the more feminine traits of passivity, quietness and resignation. The disturbance and confusion the son feels faced with is profound and moving, displaying his inability (to borrow from the story of Elijah) to hear the still small voice of calm in the storm that surrounds him.

Conclusion

As these readings suggest, the point of literary theory is not to deflect your attention from the text. Rather, it can offer you a series of lenses through which to experience it, opening it up to readings you could not have reached on your own, allowing you a deeper and more complex appreciation of the way the writer has used form, structure and language to create meaning. For these reasons, familiarising yourself with the basic tenets of a range of literary theories can only be beneficial to your studies. As the great German dramatist and theorist Bertolt Brecht writes:

A man with one theory is lost. He needs several of them - or lots! He should stuff them in his pockets like newspapers.

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