8/27/07 introduction

titan.iwu.edu/~wchapman/theories/
• books there? Apologies for cost!
• for Wednesday:
  • read over syllabus;
  • read listserv assignment but DON’T describe; I’m thinking about turning this into a blog rather than a listserv. However, the grading system should be very similar.
  • read “The Dead”—the story itself (21-59). Optional: “Biographical and Historical Contexts” (3-19). DO NOT read any of the articles in the second half of the book yet.
• syllabus:
  • print out from web syllabus at titan.iwu.edu/~wchapman/theories/
  • on web but not here: teaching notes as I post them.
• work required: mid-term, final, short paper (4-6 pp), long paper (10-15 pp), preparatory work for the papers, listserv/blog. Listserv/blog is graded on a contract--guaranteed at least a B if you do the work.
• reading
  • load is mixed. In general, there isn’t a huge load of reading, but some of the readings are difficult.
  • you’ll find that in the first half of the class there is some duplication of secondary sources. For example, in the Psych Crit section, there’s one critical article, but three different “overviews” of what psych crit is. Designed it this way at the request of former Theories students, who say that the more overlapping of secondary sources the better. If you’re pressed for time, skip the section overviews from Richter. If you’re really pressed for time, in general I would say that Barry is better than the overviews in “The Dead,” but that varies.
• introductions: why interested in theory?
• today, want to make several points; we’ll get at them by asking, “what is literary theory?” and we’ll test this question by looking at examples:
  1) “Rather than a discourse, contemporary semiotics takes as its object several semiotic practices which it considers as translinguistic; that is, they operate through and across language, while remaining irreducible to its categories as they are presently assigned.” (Kristeva, “The Bounded Text”)
  Is it theory? sure. How do you respond to it?
  —> theory has a strange place in literary studies today. The heyday of theories has passed to some degree--probably hit its peak in the 90’s--but it is still central to literary study, far more than it would have been in the 50’s or 60’s. Yet many students—and scholars—feel shut out by it. It has the reputation of being difficult. Some of that reputation--not all of it--is deserved.
  —> important to avoid two poles:
  • don’t let it make you feel stupid. Yes, the language is often difficult, and theory is often very allusive—it builds upon prior theories and usually assumes that you’re going to know what it’s talking about. But with some grounding, you CAN figure out what’s going on in a text.
  • don’t let it go to your head. Knowing some literary theory doesn’t make someone cooler than anyone else.
  2) The major elements of a story are plot, character, theme, setting and style.
Is it theory? Dictionary definitions of theory: 1) a principle or a coherent set of principles formulated to explain a class of phenomena. 2) abstract or general ideas (as opposed to practice)

We don't have to accept the dictionary definition if we don't want to, but I think we should: in general, I think we should define "theory" simply as a general principle or set of principles which apply to and help to explain a substantial number of literary texts (as opposed to a single text). Why? Because if we don't, then we begin to buy into the mystique of theory: we begin to think that if it's theory, it must necessarily be difficult, or ultra-sophisticated, or confusing, or murky; whereas if it's clear and simple, it can't be theory but must be something else like a "fact" or an "assumption." That will lead us to one or more of three undesirable consequences:

1) as mentioned earlier, we allow theory to make us feel stupid, by implying that it's theory only if we can't fully understand it.
2) or, conversely, we begin to revere theory as something necessarily difficult and therefore worthy of awe, like a kind of esoteric knowledge only available to a high priest. Truth is, we use theories all the time. Many would argue that it is impossible to read WITHOUT a theory, even if we aren't necessarily articulating the theory we're using at the time we use it.
3) we remove from analytical consideration a statement such as "the main elements of a story are plot, character, setting, theme and style," treating it not as a theory, a proposition which requires testing, but as a fact or an assumption and therefore something that cannot be questioned. In fact, however, such a statement is very debatable. The fact that so many of us don't want to credit it with the status of theory probably attests to the fact that we don't find it a very sophisticated theory and that therefore we could easily punch some holes in it.

3) "The novel Frankenstein is structured as a series of frames: in the outer frame, Walton describes the events of his journey to the North Pole; one of those events is Frankenstein's narration of the events concerning the creation of the monster. Frankenstein's narration in turn frames the monster's narration of his own life. The concerns and attitudes expressed by the narrators in the frame narratives influence the way the reader sees the events as they are narrated."

--- distinction to be made here is between theory and practice, or between literary theory and literary criticism. In fact, the line between theory and criticism is often difficult to draw. In general, theory refers to the extrapolation of general principles that can be applied to a wide range of literary works, whereas criticism refers to interpretation of individual texts. But in practice, theorists will nearly always use interpretations of literary texts as examples of the principles they espouse, and critics will often interpret texts in ways that require constructing new theoretical principles. The example I've given you is a practical reading of a text, but it USES a theoretical concept, the frame narrative.

For the most part, it won't be necessary to draw the line in a rigid way. However, in a class like this, the differences are probably considerable from your point of view. What kind of statements could you make about the following:

1) "A narrative has two elements: story, the events as they happened in time, and discourse, the events as they are represented in the narrative."
what can we do with this? First, we’d want to get it right—make sure that we understand the concept fully and describe it clearly. Then, we could agree with it, disagree, qualify it, extend it, apply it, etc.

2) “O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?”

And this? “Getting it right” has a different meaning in such a case—there is a much wider range of “right” readings of the lines. And we wouldn’t agree or disagree with it, or apply it, exactly—we would interpret it.

The latter kind of work is actually more difficult, but it’s also probably work you’re more accustomed to doing. You will find that the kinds of moves that you could make in a straight literature class won’t be directly relevant. However, you can certainly make use of them, IF you can make them explicit.