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"Mirror, Mirror on the Wall": Readers' Reflections on Literature through Literary Theories

Seeking to enhance students' experiences with literature, a high school teacher and a university professor collaborated on implementing the study of literary theories in two sophomore English classes. Through analyzing a fairy tale, a short story, and a novel, high school students developed divergent and critical thinking about literature.

When we were first handed the assignment, with an attached Snow White story, I honestly thought it was a joke. . . . However, I quickly discovered that not only was I learning new views of literature, but was also being greatly challenged by a simple fairy tale. It introduced me to several theories I had never heard of and that will help me in my future readings. (Jane's letter to the professor)

Finding new ways for students to explore, experience, and analyze literature poses a continual challenge for high school English teachers. To create divergent and critical thinkers, we need to develop stimulating literary experiences. Students' exposure to different literary theories helps them to "understand that there are many ways to know texts, to read and interpret them" (Moore 4). This ability is even more crucial since the New Critical approach still dominates the curriculum, and "[b]ecause the New Critical approach requires a set of sophisticated skills and a literary vocabulary of little interest to some students, the meaning of a text often turns out to be what the teacher says it is" (Moore 4).

As a university professor and a high school English teacher, we became interested in implementing theories in the classroom and collaborated on exploring ways to link the required curriculum with literary theories to deepen the students' experiences with literature. Although books on literary theory have been published (e.g., Moore; Soter; Appleman), one text is not used to illustrate all of the theories. Due to time and curricular constraints, we found a short text to illustrate literary theories prior to using longer works. Sophomores in two English 10 World Studies

classes were introduced to literary theories through the Grimm brothers' tale "Snow White"[1] and then applied these theories to the analysis of D. H. Lawrence's "The Rocking-Horse Winner" and George Orwell's *1984*. We selected "Snow White" because of its familiarity and length. Aspects of five theories were chosen because critics have analyzed "Snow White" from these perspectives. Because of space limitations, we present three of the theories, followed by the students' analysis of the fairy tale, a short story, and a novel.

The Literary Theories

Structuralist Theory

Structuralist theory has its roots in linguistics, specifically the work of Ferdinand de Saussure. From this perspective, the system of language—its grammar—governs the parts of language and their interrelationships, enabling us to see how language itself produces meaning. Structuralists analyze the meaning of a linguistic unit as it relates to other signs within the system of language. These relationships occur along two axes. The vertical axis involves the specific noun or verb that is ordered (e.g., noun = girl). The horizontal axis refers to the order of language units, such as nouns and verbs (e.g., noun–verb–direct object).

Meaning occurs when a unit, such as a noun, is associated with a concept (e.g., girl = female child). Meaning also arises through binary oppositions, which highlight differences between units of language; you recognize something as having meaning because it is not something else (e.g., +girl = −boy).

Just as language at the sentence level has a grammar, works of literature, such as folktales, epics,

and novels, also have a grammar. Thus, a folktale is a system with logically connected parts, that is, an arrangement of functionally related characters and themes (Ryan). Vladimir Propp was one of the first scholars to apply a structural approach in his analysis of one hundred Russian fairy tales. He identified thirty-one functions, "the recurrent constants of the tale," which could be combined to form its typological structure (20). In the following elements, functions are italicized: a *hero leaves* home despite an *interdiction* not to, he *encounters a villain* who *tricks* him, and he unwittingly becomes an *accomplice in his own deception.*

A Structuralist Approach to "Snow White"

Steven Swann Jones applied a structuralist approach to "Snow White." He analyzed the episodes (i.e., segments of texts that have a goal attempt, goal outcome, and reaction to the goal) of over four hundred versions ranging over a five-hundred-year period. The structure underlying the versions consisted of nine episodes organized into two parts. The functions (e.g., the persecutor, the heroine) are embedded within the episodes (see fig. 1).

Another aspect of structuralist analysis is the concept of binary oppositions that hold the text together. In "Snow White," some binary oppositions are reflected in the following pairs: good/evil, beauty/not beauty, reward/punishment, innocence/artifice, youth/age, royalty/servants, natural/supernatural, birth/death, village/forest, and castle/cottage.

Feminist Criticism

Despite their differences, "feminist critics generally agree that their goals are to expose patriarchal premises and resulting prejudices, to promote discovery and reevaluation of literature by women, and to examine social, cultural, and psychosexual contexts of literature and literary criticism" (Guerin et al. 197). In general, there has been a shift from negative attacks on males writing about women towards a positive delineation of women's redefinition of their identity in their own writing.

Feminist criticism has examined the negative effects of fairy tales for three decades attacking "the same heroines—notably Cinderella, Snow White, and Sleeping Beauty—again and again, until the feminist view of such heroines has itself become a stereotype" (Stone 230). Critics have highlighted aggressive heroines, re-

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FIGURE 1. Episode Structure of "Snow White"

Part I

Episode 1: origin, the family situation, and conception of the heroine

Episode 2: persecutor, jealous of heroine's beauty

Episode 3: expulsion from home by the persecutor who orders her murder

Episode 4: adoption of the heroine and rescue from her homeless plight

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Part II

Episode 1: renewed jealousy of persecutor

Episode 2: death or apparent death of heroine by persecutor

Episode 3: exhibition of heroine's corpse

Episode 4: resuscitation of heroine

Episode 5: resolution, heroine's marriage, and punishment of persecutor

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worked old tales, or reexamined negatively perceived heroines to find their strengths. Stone contends that fairy tale studies reflect changes within the larger feminist movement. Most feminist writing about the fairy tale in the 1960s and before was critical of the passive and submissive heroines as narrow and damaging role models for young readers. In the 1970s, these heroines were reevaluated, revealing their inner strengths and uniquely female form of development. In the 1980s, feminist analyses focused on the language and context of the initiation process rather than directly on the thematic and psychological aspects of the heroine's initiation. In the 1990s, women of color and postmodern feminists contributed new perspectives "on issues of diversity, the complexity of sexism, and the centrality of context to understanding gender issues" (Corey 346).

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Feminist Theory and "Snow White"

Feminist critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar analyzed the patriarchal structure of fairy tales, drawing on both gender studies and psychoanalytic

approaches. They contended that "Snow White" is about the relationship between "the angel" and the "monster" (46): one is fair, young, and pale, the other is just as fair but older and fiercer; one is a daughter, the other a mother; one seems ignorant and passive while the other is artful and active. Their conflict is fought out largely in a transparent, magic looking glass and an enchanted glass coffin. The patriarchal voice of judgment that rules the queen through the mirror could be that of the king. The queen represents different aspects of femininity in her roles of the three disguised women who attempt to kill Snow White. Snow White's life with the dwarves is important in her education as a submissive female who learns the lessons of service, selflessness, and domesticity. In the end, the prince begs the dwarves for Snow White's coffin, declaring he will "honour her and treasure her as my dearest possession" (81), and, in this role, Snow White conforms to the patriarchal image of the "ideal woman." While Snow White is freed from the coffin, she is imprisoned in the looking glass; her only escape from this second glass coffin is through plots and schemes, lies, and disguises. Snow White is faced with choosing a life defined by the magic looking glass or dancing to her death.

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Marxist Theory

Marxist criticism grew out of the philosophy of Karl Marx, who saw society as a class struggle between the bourgeois class who owned the factories and the proletariat class who labored in them. He advocated a revolution in which the working classes would overthrow the middle classes, resulting in a classless society where everyone could share equally in the goods (Kreiger, Jantzen, and Neill). Marxist literary critic Terry Eagleton identified four major movements of Marxist criticism that grew out of Marxist theory: (1) the anthropological emphasizes the biological basis of aesthetics; (2) the political focuses on the utilitarian role of art in shaping or disrupting government

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cultural policy; (3) the economic centers on the production of art; and (4) the ideological considers the context of work as inscribed in its language use, structure, and word play. In ideological criticism, a society's values can be inferred from the text. The goal of criticism is to reveal the historical and ideological subtexts that Marxist critic Fredric Jameson terms as the "political unconscious." Jack Zipes, a scholar of fairy tales who built on Jameson's work, noted that history is accessible only in textual form. Oral folktales served as a discourse about mores, values, and manners to socialize children into the social code of that time. The Grimms's collecting and editing activity coincided with the sociocultural shifts accompanying Germany's movement from a small, agrarian society to an industrialized power. Their tales played an integral part in the Prussian Empire and Nazi Germany to foster nationalistic spirit.

Marxist Studies and "Snow White"

The Grimm brothers, according to Zipes, had a particular socialization process in mind, which is illustrated by their depiction of families and gender roles. Snow White was given tasks consistent with the duties of a bourgeois girl, and these were implicitly part of her moral obligations. She was expected to be modest, industrious, humble, honest, diligent, virginal, and self-denying. The young man, like the prince, was expected to be active, strong, courageous, and wise. The tale reinforced nineteenth-century patriarchal notions about women. The dwarves demonstrated the positive values of industriousness and loyalty. The role of the dwarves, similar to that of the peasant and artisan classes, is echoed in the valuing of the hard work and solidarity needed for survival. These representatives of lower socioeconomic classes remain stable and support the social order. In her sojourn with the dwarves, Snow White takes up the role of the woman who creates a domestic haven for the dwarves who, in turn, work outside the home to earn the income to support the family. Ultimately, however, the dwarves are powerless to protect Snow White from the powerful queen. The death of the wicked queen restores the conservative social order that maintained the division of social classes. The corrupt power of the old queen is replaced by the benevolent power of the new queen when Snow White marries the prince; the dwarves retain their status as workers in the mine.

Application in the Classroom

The introduction to literary theories was completed in three phases. In the first phase, I (Joanne) briefly related to the students the purpose of studying literary theories and emphasized the differences between this approach and the traditional formalists' way of looking at literature. I shared our rationale for using "Snow White" because of its brevity and the existing analyses of the tale that provide insights into aspects of the theories. After the tale was read aloud, students were given a handout highlighting aspects of the theories, placed in small groups, and assigned different theories that they applied to the tale and presented to the whole class.

"The Rocking-Horse Winner"

In the second phase of the lesson, in a Readers Theater format, students read D. H. Lawrence's short story, "The Rocking-Horse Winner," about a family's self-destruction because of their obsession to acquire more money. Each group reviewed the theory handouts, took notes guided by a brief summary handout to focus the analysis, and presented their analysis to the whole class.

One structuralist group identified five episodes. They depicted Episode 1, for example, as "the attempt is to understand what it means to be lucky . . . the outcome is the mom and son talk about luck and the reaction is confusion."

The group noted that the binary opposites in the story are: "rich/poor, lucky/unlucky, strategy/impulse, death/life, understanding/confusion, and winning/losing."

In a feminist theory group, Helen observed that "the mom is kind of stereotypical on the outside because everyone thinks she's a good mom but really she's not." Melissa added that "this is not a feminist story just because it's not the ideal woman because on the outside she seemed like a good mom but then they said that the bad thing about the mom was that she wasn't a good mom kind of implying that you have to be a good mom if you're a woman." Nikki stated that we also think "that the mom had a lot of power [and] that she's the one that really made Paul realize that the family need[ed] the money." Susie made an interesting observation: "Paul saved her [his mother] and in the same sense that the prince always saves the princess in the fairy tales and in all the little Disney stuff so like in 'Snow White' like the prince came and saved Snow White and Paul came and saved his mom."

A Marxist group noted: "[W]hen they pool the money, it is a symbol of wanting to share equally all the wealth being in the same class. An opposite of Marxism is when the mother finally gets more money, she spends it on unworthy things and it doesn't make her any more happy." Dillon remarked that "the opposite of Marxist is when the mother got the money and they were getting close to having an equal class they went and instead of spending it by paying off her debts she spent it on tutors for him and bought like expensive furniture and things."

1984

In the third phase, students answered questions prior to their literary analysis. After responding to these questions, each student selected a theory to apply to 1984. One structuralist group identified thirteen episodes in three parts. The first episode involved the "introduction to Winston . . . and we learn about Oceania and Big Brother . . . and we experience 2 minutes of hate." In the second episode, "Winston buys a diary and is trying to figure out who he is and deals with his problems and talks a lot about how he hides his diary."

In their notes and discussion of binary opposites, a group noted the following pairs: freedom/slavery, ignorance/strength, war/peace, reality/illusion, asleep/awake, hate/love, loyalty/unloyalty, sanity/insanity, defeat/undefeated, guilt/pride, ignorance/wisdom, and truth/lies. Kaitlin concluded that "binary oppositions basically hold the text together."

In a feminist group, Jasmine observed that the "women's basic role is to pretty much have children." Cindy commented on the physical characteristics related to gender: "[W]omen wear trousers, they're not supposed to wear make-up or perfume, they have short hair and little known hygiene and they're kind of like men almost." Jolene summarized the group's dilemma: "[W]e were trying to decide if the roles were stereotypical or not. . . . I mean it wasn't a feminist theory that women stay home and they cooked and cleaned and cared for kids because they were out with the men and they were equal providers . . . but men had the power." Lonnetta added, "We were trying to decide who had the most power and we had two answers—first we said men because they control the appearance of society . . . and then we said neither because they all follow the same rules and regulations and are treated the same."

A Marxist group reported that "the party works for the government and the proles pretty much just make stuff; it's their only role; they don't really participate in the government and everything." Ken added that the "proles are just like worthless. They're like poor people and they have no say in what goes on." John remarked that

> the proles which make up about eighty-five per cent of the population spend most of their time gambling and searching for food to survive their every day lives and in their minds there's apathy permeating throughout and they are just careless about everything . . . the party manipulates the citizens and enforces Big Brother's rules.

In their notes the group wrote that there is no power struggle because "Big Brother has it all, but there is potential conflict if the Brotherhood rebels."

Reflections

In the last phase, the students wrote letters to the university professor (Joanne) about the unit. Their reflections fell into four categories: (1) the choice of the work is important—not all works lend themselves to application of theories; (2) "Snow White" was effective for introducing the theories; (3) the sequence of the lesson worked well; and (4) more time, explanation, and simpler vocabulary are needed.

In our analysis of the lesson, we agreed with the students' points and noted additional issues: (1) the novel should be finished before the theories are introduced; (2) the theories should be woven in over the course of a semester; (3) a review of the New Critical theory prior to the presentation of the theories would enable comparison; (4) other theories such as deconstruction, cultural studies, post-structuralism, and reader-response could be used; and (5) it may have helped students' understanding if a synopsis of the theory was given after each presentation.

Overall, we concluded that the unit was worthwhile because the students developed their critical-reading skills and deepened their understanding of literature by experimenting with these different literary theories.

Note

1. Although the Grimm brothers title the story "Snowwhite," subsequent editors and adapters use "Snow White." We employ the commonly recognized spelling "Snow White" in this article and with our students.

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